

Letty



Arthur W. Pinero

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LETTER

AN ORIGINAL DRAMA

In Four Acts and an Epilogue

By ARTHUR W. PINERO

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN
MCMIV

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THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

NEVILL LETCHMERE.

IVOR CROSBIE.

COPPINGER DRAKE.

BERNARD MANDEVILLE.

RICHARD PERRY.

NEALE. (*A Commercial Traveller.*)

ORDISH. (*Agent for an Insurance Company.*)

RUGG. (*Mr. Letchmere's Servant.*)

FRÉDÉRIC. (*A Maître d'hôtel.*)

WAITERS.

MRS. IVOR CROSBIE.

LETTY SHELL.

MARION ALLARDYCE. } (*Clerks at Dugdale's.*)

HILDA GUNNING. (*An Assistant at Madame Watkins's.*)

A LADY'S-MAID.

The scene is laid in London:—The First and Fourth Acts at Mr. Letchmere's Flat in Grafton Street, New Bond Street; the Second at a house in Langham Street; the Third in a private room at the Café Régenee; and the Epilogue at a photographer's in Baker Street. The events of the four acts of the drama, commencing on a Saturday in June, take place within the space of a few hours. Between the Fourth Act and the Epilogue two years and six months are supposed to elapse.

This play was produced in London, at the Duke of York's Theatre, on Thursday, October 8, 1903, and in New York, at the Hudson Theatre, on Monday, September 12, 1904.

All applications respecting amateur performances of this play must be made to Mr. Pinero's agents, SAMUEL FRENCH, Limited, 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.

LETTY

THE FIRST ACT

The scene represents a spacious apartment, decorated and furnished luxuriously and tastefully, upon the first floor of a house in Grafton Street. On the right are two windows overlooking the northern end of Albemarle Street. The window nearer the spectator is a bay, the further window an ordinary one. Also on the right, but in the wall at the back, is a double-door. A portière hangs in the recess of the doorway; it is, however, drawn aside and the door is open, affording a view of a smaller chamber having the appearance of a library and smoking-room. From the right centre the back wall advances at a right angle for a few feet, and then continues its course to the wall on the left. In the advanced back wall is another double-door, also open. Beyond is a corridor, on the further side of which a third double-door gives admittance to a bedroom. Within the bedroom a screen is placed before the door so that the interior of this room is hidden. The corridor runs away on the left as if leading to an entrance lobby. Near the fireplace, which is on the left, stands a large table; on it is a nondescript repast, daintily set for four

persons—the glass, silver, and napery being of an elegant kind—consisting of a huge cake, some dishes containing various fruits and sweetmeats, and two decanters of wine. The cake is elaborately ornamented, and bears an inscription in green letters upon a white ground. A settee and three chairs are drawn up to the table. On the opposite side of the room, partly in the bay window, are a grand pianoforte and a music-stool, and, by the piano, standing out into the room, are another settee, a small table, and two chairs. One of the chairs is on the left of the small table, the other behind it. A writing-table and chair stand before the further window; while the spaces not provided for in this description are filled by choice cabinets, figures in bronze and marble, and lamps of graceful design.

The light is that of a brilliant afternoon in the height of summer. In the library the exterior blinds are lowered, but in the nearer room they are almost entirely raised and the fierce glare of the sun is seen without.

[NOTE :—The descriptions of the scenery, and the directions for the movements of the characters, are set out as from the point of view of the audience. Thus, Right and Left are the spectator's right and left, not the actor's.]

[RUGG, a spruce man-servant, is surveying the table on the left with a grin. The bell of an outer door rings and he disappears, going along the corridor in the direction of the hall. Presently he returns showing in IVOR CROSBIE, a scrupulously-tailored “man about town”—bilious-looking, seven-and-thirty, heavy and dull in manner.

RUGG.

Mr. Letchmere is in his bedroom, Mr. Ivor. I'll tell him.

[CROSBIE deposits his hat upon the table on the right and strolls over to the larger table, where he also views the preparations for the feast. RUGG knocks at the bedroom door.

NEVILL.

[From within.] Yes?

RUGG.

Mr. Crosbie, sir.

[RUGG vanishes, closing the door on the left upon CROSBIE. CROSBIE is deciphering the inscription on the cake as NEVILL LETCHMERE comes through the library and enters at the door on the right. NEVILL is a tall, handsome young man of twenty-nine, engaging in spite of a smile that too frequently partakes of the sardonic.

NEVILL.

[Bestowing a nod upon his visitor.] Hullo!

CROSBIE.

[Sulkily.] Hullo! [Referring to the inscription.] Who's "Letty"?

NEVILL.

A young lady of my acquaintance.

CROSBIE.

"Many Happy Returns——"

NEVILL.

A select little birthday-party.

CROSBIE.

[*With a sneer.*] Ho! Your latest, I presume?

NEVILL.

You wrong me—quite an innocent affair, I assure you. [*Picking up a fan which lies at hand and throwing himself upon the settee on the right.*] And how is the most genial, the most vivacious, of brothers-in-law?

CROSBIE.

Don't chaff—infernally out of temper.

NEVILL.

[*Fanning himself.*] Incredible! Who can have succeeded in checking your enviable flow of spirits?

CROSBIE.

[*Facing him.*] Your sister; you might almost guess that. [*In a weak rage.*] I won't have it, Nevill; I won't stick it, I tell you.

NEVILL.

You'll not stick——?

CROSBIE.

Being made a laughing-stock of, being made to appear damnably ridiculous.

NEVILL.

The weather isn't favourable to argument—but do

you really believe that anybody but himself can make a man ridiculous ?

CROSBIE.

I want none of your cheap sarcasm. [*Sitting by the settee on which NEVILL is reclining.*] Look here, Nevill ! I speak candidly—there's no other way. You're a bad lot, you Letchmeres. You're nice enough on the outside——

NEVILL.

Flatterer !

CROSBIE.

But under the crust you're rotten bad. You know you are. [*Wiping his brow.*] And Florence is a thoroughly characteristic specimen of your precious family.

NEVILL.

[*Raising himself slightly.*] You put your views with so much charm and delicacy, dear Ivor, that I hardly like to request you to restrict your criticism to my own personal failings.

CROSBIE.

Delicacy be hanged ! This aint the time for it. Her behaviour with young Drake is a positive scandal.

NEVILL.

[*Elevating his brows.*] Drake ?

CROSBIE.

Coppinger Drake. I was dining^ with some^ men at the Carlton last night—in she sails with Drake. What kind of figure d'ye think I cut ? I and my

pals went on to the play. Confound it if Copy and she didn't turn up directly afterwards !

NEVILL.

[*Sitting erect, frowningly.*] Drake's a very decent fellow, isn't he ?

CROSBIE.

[*Rising and walking away.*] Decent ! All over the place with another man's wife ! I've had enough of it. I mayn't be exactly a model husband——

NEVILL.

You don't even spare yourself. Admirable impartiality !

CROSBIE.

[*Leaning upon the back of a chair, moodily.*] It's a risky business, I dare say, *any* man marryin'. But for one of settled habits it's plainly a mug's game. The day's safe to come when you realise that a rattling good bottle of Clicquot and a weed are worth the smartest woman goin'. [With a short laugh, NEVILL gets upon his feet.] Yes, I admit I'm by no means a model husband, Nevill, but I—[*drawing himself up and looking the other in the face.*] I'm not an accommo-dating one. Comprenez ?

NEVILL.

Perfectly.

CROSBIE.

I give you and Florence fair warning, then——

NEVILL.

What do you expect me to do?

[*The bell of the outer door is heard.*

CROSBIE.

Your party? I'm *de trop*.

NEVILL.

[*Consulting his watch.*] My friends are not due till four o'clock.

CROSBIE.

[*Listening.*] I hear the swish of skirts, though.
[*Fetching his hat—sneering again.*] You never include me in your innercent gatherin's. [*Returning to NEVILL who has moved towards the door on the left.*] Well, you have a straight talk with Florence—you follow me? You had better, Nevill, my son——![*The door on the left is thrown open, and FLORENCE—MRS. IVOR CROSBIE—appears.*
She is a pretty, animated little creature, dressed in the extreme of fashion, a year or two junior to NEVILL, with a baby face and big, lustrous eyes. She presents her cheek to NEVILL who kisses it, but of CROSBIE she takes no notice.

FLORENCE.

[*To NEVILL.*] Hope I'm not spoiling an interesting tête-à-tête. I found myself passing your door. Phew! it's eighty in the shade——! [*Observing the preparations for the party.*] My dear boy, what a spread!

CROSBIE.

[With an uncomfortable laugh.] Rather an embarrassing coincidence, this! But accidents will happen in the best regulated households. [Advancing to her.] Excuse me—you've just been the subject of conversation between your brother and myself.

[She sits, on the right of the large table, facing the cake, and removes her gloves.

CROSBIE.

Yes, and I strongly advise you to listen to what he's got to say to you. If you don't, there'll be trouble—d'ye hear? [In another fit of impotent rage.] What the devil do you mean by ignoring my presence? You dare turn your back on me——! [Finding NEVILL at his side—after a pause.] Oh, all right.

[He smooths his hat with his sleeve, hesitates, slowly settles his hat upon his head, and departs without further speech. The outer door is slammed.

FLORENCE.

[Contracting her shoulder blades.] Ugh!

NEVILL.

This is delightful, my dear Tiny. [Taking a scent-spray from the table on the right and perfuming the air.] Why do you trip up my stairs so seldom?

FLORENCE.

One is always in doubt as to whom one will meet here.

NEVILL.

[*Closing the door on the left.*] Oh, Ivor's a rare bird.

FLORENCE.

He—yes. [*Pointing to the cake.*] But this kind of thing. [*Reading the inscription.*] “Letty. Many Happy Returns of the Day.” Who is Letty, please?

NEVILL.

[*Discreetly.*] My dear girl!

FLORENCE.

I insist! [*He laughs, shaking his head; she pouts.*] I won't upbraid you—there!

NEVILL.

A clerk at a Bucket-shop in Waterloo Place, if you are bent upon knowing.

FLORENCE.

[*Twisting her chair round.*] What's a Bucket-shop?

NEVILL.

Lamentable ignorance!

FLORENCE.

Bucket-shop!

NEVILL.

[*Laying the spray aside and taking a cigarette from his case.*] The den of the Outside Stockbroker—a smart gentleman who is at once the tipster and bookmaker of the Stock Exchange and a rogue in both relations.

FLORENCE.

A swindler?

NEVILL.

An arrant brigand thriving mainly upon the shame-faced gambling propensities of the respectable classes. The credulous parson, the sanguine widow, and the struggling professional-man are his chief victims—although his transactions are occasionally spiced by a soiled flimsy from an adventurous *demi-mondaine*.

FLORENCE.

How delectable!

NEVILL.

[Lighting his cigarette.] This Waterloo Place gang is particularly eminent. "Dugdale's," they call themselves. As a matter of fact, they are three worthies of the names of Hammerstein, Cohen, and Mandeville.

FLORENCE.

And Miss Letty—does she participate in the golden gains?

NEVILL

Good lord, no! Poor Letty! She's one of a dozen young women who live laborious days for a weekly wage of five or seven-and-twenty shillings.

FLORENCE.

[Looking at the table again.] Who are the others?

NEVILL.

Others?

FLORENCE.

[*Indicating the remaining places.*] You've two other guests apparently.

NEVILL.

Ah, yes—Miss Allardyce, also of the Dugdale establishment. The austere Marion shares a stuffy lodging with Letty in the most depressing locality conceivable. [*Seating himself at the piano and touching the keys lightly as they talk.*] You notice, dearest Tiny, that the proprieties are rigidly complied with.

FLORENCE.

[*Rising.*] And the third? [*He throws his head back and laughs heartily.*] Now what tickles you?

NEVILL.

Some of your marvellous gowns are fabricated in Dover Street, aren't they, by the sublime Madame Watkins?

FLORENCE.

[*Glancing at herself.*] These are her rags.

NEVILL.

Miss Gunning is an assistant at Mrs. Watkins's, and, when at home, a next-door neighbour of Letty's. Doubtless she has often helped to stick pins in your diminutive person.

FLORENCE.

[*Advancing.*] How on earth do you contrive to scrape acquaintance with people of this description, Nevill?

NEVILL.

Through being on earth.

FLORENCE.

Fiddle !

NEVILL.

Oh, I scarcely remember. An encounter, perhaps, under a friendly portico while sheltering from the rain, the chivalrous offer of an umbrella—no matter.

FLORENCE.

[*Kneeling upon the settee by the piano, watching him curiously.*] Old boy.

NEVILL.

[*In the middle of a lively air.*] Hullo ?

FLORENCE.

Isn't this playing it pretty low down ?

NEVILL.

You deplore the disregard of social barriers. Tush ! it is a levelling age.

FLORENCE.

Bar joking. You understand ; this Letty——

NEVILL.

Miss Elizabeth Shell ? She despairs the Elizabeth, but the unpoetic fact remains.

FLORENCE.

She's the attraction, evidently. [With a grimace.] How can you !

NEVILL.

[*Taking his hands from the piano and facing her, a note of sincerity in his voice.*] I feel bound to remark,

my dear Tiny—not in my own defence but in vindication of the young lady—that Letty, christened Elizabeth, is as straight—I employ the vernacular—as straight as any woman in our more polite world whom you or I shall meet in a day's march.

FLORENCE.

Positively?

NEVILL.

Positively.

FLORENCE.

[*Significantly.*] Isn't that an excellent reason, then, for your leaving her alone?

[*He rises and walks away to the table on the left where he stands contemplating the birthday-feast.*

NEVILL.

Yes, that blithe, mercurial spirit—your husband—was reminding me, a few minutes ago, that we Letchmeres are a vicious crew. Ha! the utterance may have lacked something of urbanity; [*shrugging his shoulders*] but—

FLORENCE.

[*Sitting upon the settee.*] By-the-by, Nevill, what procured you the felicity of a visit from Ivor?

NEVILL.

[*Turning to her.*] He called to complain about you and young Drake.

FLORENCE.

[*With a show of indifference.*] Oh?

NEVILL.

[*Advancing.*] He says that Copy and you are together a great deal too frequently and that he's had enough of it.

FLORENCE.

Indeed ?

NEVILL.

And if you ask my opinion, my dear girl, I fancy——

FLORENCE.

What ?

NEVILL.

That he *has* had enough of it. [Firmly.] You'd better drop it. [*She laughs uneasily.*] No, no ; stop that for a moment.

FLORENCE.

[*Rising.*] But how amusing ! And, by way of emphasis, he declares his conviction that, as a tribe, we are—more or less imperfect, eh ?

NEVILL.

Rotten bad, to quote him.

FLORENCE.

[*Making a moue.*] Rotten bad !

NEVILL.

[*Grimly.*] Well, aren't we ?

FLORENCE.

[*Turning away and seating herself on the left of the table on the right.*] Oh, perhaps.

NEVILL.

Every one of us, men and women—rotten to the core!

FLORENCE.

[*Tracing the pattern of the carpet with her foot.*] Every one of us? Isn't that a bit premature?

NEVILL.

I beg your pardon. [*Laying a hand upon her shoulder.*] Yes, not you, Tiny. You'll make a better show than the rest, old girl.

FLORENCE.

[*Weakly.*] Ha, ha!

NEVILL.

The family record is monotonous reading. You'll be the first to vary it—for how many generations? [*Thoughtfully but with his characteristic smile.*] And—who knows!—the spell once broken—Old Nick once kicked on the shins—once—!

FLORENCE.

[*Arranging her hair with shaky, uncertain fingers.*] Nevill—

NEVILL.

[*Rousing himself.*] So don't you be seen about town constantly with young Drake, or young anybody. Tiny, you be careful not to give people the faintest excuse for humping their shoulders and exclaiming, “another Letchmere——!”

[*She rises abruptly, breaking in upon him, and, holding the lapels of his coat, speaks in low, tremulous tones.*

FLORENCE.

Nevill——!

NEVILL.

Eh?

FLORENCE.

I—I wish to speak to you regarding Copy Drake; that's why I hunted you up this afternoon.

NEVILL.

Yes?

FLORENCE.

Oh, I recognize that it won't do. I made up my mind yesterday.

NEVILL.

Made up your mind——?

FLORENCE.

Told him that he or I must clear out—give each other a wide berth—chuck it——

NEVILL.

[*With set teeth.*] Well?

FLORENCE.

We're in time; we've not lost our heads completely. He's a sensible boy, and as good as gold—only—he's mad about me. [*He leaves her angrily and paces the room.*] Psht! if that's the way you take it——

[*She moves as if to depart; he returns to her.*]

NEVILL.

You fool! why haven't you come to me before?

FLORENCE.

[With a shrug.] I am here now—and, I repeat, in time. The whole thing is settled—he's going.

NEVILL.

Where?

FLORENCE.

Scotland.

NEVILL.

When?

FLORENCE.

He starts to-night, late, in his motor—the Panhard he and I have had so many ripping runs in. Poor dear wretch! he goes into the dark, he says. [Pleadingly.] And I want you to help me over it.

NEVILL.

Help you—?

FLORENCE.

We've arranged to dine together first—our last meal—the Café Régence—half-past-eight—

NEVILL.

Alone?

FLORENCE.

So he imagines. [Lowering her voice.] But, Nevill, I don't want to be alone with Copy to-night. I want you to be with us all the while—and to see me home. You—you'll stick to me?

NEVILL.

[Gripping her shoulders.] By God, yes!

[He draws a deep breath and sits by the table on the right, staring at the ceiling.

FLORENCE.

Thanks—awfully.

[Suddenly she breaks down, produces her hand-kerchief in a hurry, and stifles a sob with it. He doesn't move.]

FLORENCE.

[Recovering herself and blowing her nose.] I—I'll send a line to Copy telling him I've asked you to join us. *[Going to the writing-table.]* Shall I write here?

NEVILL.

[Sourly.] It sounds a rational proceeding.

FLORENCE.

[Gazing out of the window.] Oh, for heaven's sake, don't be cutting——! *[Drawing back.]* Oh!

NEVILL.

[Turning to her.] What's that?

FLORENCE.

[Under her breath.] There is Copy. *[He rises and joins her.]* In Albemarle Street, outside Viola's.

NEVILL.

Yes, it's he.

FLORENCE.

[Taking NEVILL's arm.] He has been giving me lunch. *[With frightened eyes.]* He left me downstairs—he promised not to wait——

NEVILL.

Tsha!

FLORENCE.

I am sorry to bore you, old boy—call a hansom and drive me to my door, will you ?

NEVILL.

Certainly.

[*The outer-door bell is heard.*

FLORENCE.

[*Releasing his arm.*] Your—your young women ?

NEVILL.

Probably.

FLORENCE.

[*With offended dignity.*] Surely you'll not let me meet them ?

NEVILL.

My dear Tiny, I am incapable of anything so shocking. [*Indicating the library.*] Go through there into my bedroom ; I'll fetch you in a minute or two, after I have made my excuses.

[*She passes into the library. Rugg, having first knocked at the door, enters from the corridor.*

RUGG.

[*Casting an eye round the room.*] Miss Gunning.

NEVILL.

Show Miss Gunning in.

[*Rugg withdraws.*

FLORENCE.

[*Peeping into the room—in low, indignant tones.*] It's disgraceful of you, Nevill !

[*He laughs.* She disappears as RUGG returns with HILDA GUNNING. HILDA is a tall, comely, showily dressed young woman with an opulent physique and heavy, languorous eyes. She speaks with a drawl which she has contracted from the aristocratic customers of Mrs. Watkins, moves in an indolent way, and has the aspect generally of one who takes life easily. RUGG retires.

NEVILL.

[*Shaking hands with her.*] How do you do ?

HILDA.

Middling, thanks. I had a raging tooth-ache all the morning, but I'm rid of it now.

NEVILL.

[*Demurely.*] Glad.

HILDA.

[*Turning her sleepy eyes upon him.*] It's that back tooth—the one I was talking to you about the other day. [Reproachfully.] You've forgotten.

NEVILL.

As if I could do so !

HILDA.

[Apologetically.] I thought you might have, being busy. Madame Watkins accommodated me by lending me her Nervine. [Loftily.] She's not a bad old fat sort, really. Where are the girls ?

NEVILL.

You are the first to honour me. [Referring to her sunshade.] May I believe you of your——?

HILDA.

Well, somebody must be first, I always maintain. [Shaking out the lace of her sunshade as she yields possession of it.] Effective, isn't it?

NEVILL.

Most effective.

HILDA.

Not in the least *magasang*.

NEVILL.

Magasin?

HILDA.

That's what Madame claims for every article we produce at our place—be it what it may, she says, there's nothing *magasang* about it. [Pointing to the sunshade.] You wouldn't take that for soiled, would you?

NEVILL.

[Politely incredulous.] Soiled! impossible!

HILDA.

[With a nod.] Slightly. Young ladies in business have such exceptional opportunities. [Displaying herself languidly.] This bodice was designed for the Honourable Mrs. Copeland. A friend of yours?

NEVILL.

I grieve, no.

HILDA.

Thought she might be. Good form, isn't it ?

NEVILL.

Absolutely.

HILDA.

She threw it back on our hands. A glance shows you it isn't *magasang*. Now, this skirt I'm wearing——

NEVILL.

Exquisite.

HILDA.

[*Discovering the birthday-feast and advancing to the table.*] Oh, I declare !

NEVILL.

[*Laying the sunshade aside on the right.*] Eh ?

HILDA.

[*Inspecting the cake.*] "Letty. Many Happy Returns——"! How splendidly you do things !

NEVILL.

An exceedingly modest banquet.

HILDA.

But money will do anything, won't it ? This'll quite throw *my* party into the shade.

NEVILL.

Your——?

HILDA.

I'm giving a party to Letty later in the afternoon, at home. I live in the next house to hers, you know.

NEVILL.

I know.

HILDA.

What am I thinking of—you've often put her down at my door, haven't you? [*The bell of the outer door is heard again.*] There they are, I expect. [*Sitting, in a chair on the left.*] So I considered it polite to invite the chaps lodging in both houses—Letty's and mine. I suppose you wouldn't pay me the compliment—no, of course you wouldn't.

NEVILL.

[*Gallantly.*] My dear Hilda!

HILDA.

Five-thirty I've asked 'em for; but we shall go on for as long as we're happy.

NEVILL.

It would afford me the utmost pleasure—er—if I find that my engagements permit—

HILDA.

Well, you'll see how you feel, won't you?

[*Rugg reappears, followed by Marion Allard Dyce, a plainly dressed young woman, frank in bearing and blunt in speech.*
Rugg withdraws.

NEVILL.

[*Shaking hands with MARION.*] Is Letty not with you?

MARION.

Her hat didn't come home, and she had to tear off after it. She will be here soon. [To HILDA.] Good afternoon, dear.

NEVILL.

I am going to behave very rudely, I fear. A rather pressing matter has arisen which necessitates my leaving you for a few minutes. I throw myself on your mercy.

HILDA.

Don't you worry about us.

MARION.

We'll tell Letty.

NEVILL.

Beg her to forgive me. [*Glancing towards the adjoining room.*] There are some picture-papers in there. I can't apologise sufficiently. [*At the door on the left.*] A quarter-of-an-hour at the furthest.

HILDA.

Ta-ta!

[*He leaves them, closing the door upon them.*

MARION.

[*Taking off her gloves.*] Picture-papers! Why do gentlemen always treat girls in our position as if we're unintelligent children?

HILDA.

[*Rising.*] Do they? Well, I don't object to being treated as a child, as long as I'm handsomely treated. [*Pointing to the banquet and moving away.*] Did you ever see anything more *recherchy*?

MARION.

[*Disdainfully.*] Sugar and spice and all things nice!

HILDA.

Oh, you never have a good word for him. [*Entering the library.*] He couldn't be more attentive to us if he tried; that's enough for me.

MARION.

[*Bending over the cake to read the inscription, and raising her voice so that it reaches HILDA.*] Bosh! you and I are merely made use of, Hilda. Letty isn't the kind of girl to come to his rooms unprotected, supposing he wished her to do so.

HILDA.

They are elegant rooms, too! This is the first squint I've had at his snuggery. I could do with diggings like these, Marion.

MARION.

[*Ironically.*] Ha! you'll be able to be a constant visitor here when Letty is Mrs. Nevill Letclimere.

HILDA.

He'd give his wife a house, I should fancy. After all, these are only bachelor-quarters.

MARION.

[Carefully blowing into her gloves previous to folding them neatly and putting them into a bag suspended from her waist.] I forgot; it will be a mansion in Belgrave Square at the very least!

HILDA.

[Appearing in the doorway.] Funnier things have happened.

MARION.

Oh, I've no patience with either you or Letty. Honestly, Hilda—you don't believe at the bottom of your heart that Mr. Letchmere's intentions are serious?

HILDA.

[Returning to MARION.] Why shouldn't I? She believes it, I'm certain.

MARION.

[Sitting, on the right of the table on the left—angrily.] Oh!

HILDA.

It's so easy to throw cold water. Watch him! The proper respect he pays her! What better sign can you have that a chap means well by a girl? [Removing her gloves in a leisurely way.] He hasn't even gone the length of kissing her.

MARION.

[Quietly.] Who's your authority?

HILDA.

She.

MARIION.

She ?

HILDA.

Last night, after he'd driven her home from Earl's Court, she ran in to my place to show me her frock. We sat jawing about the exhibition till my lamp burnt itself out, and then, all of a sudden, without leading up to it, she jumped up and hooked her arm through mine and said, "Hilda!"—precisely in that tone of voice—"Hilda!" she said——

MARIION.

Yes ?

HILDA.

"What is it?" I said. "Hilda," she said, "girls like me—high-spirited, fairly good-looking girls who unexpectedly find themselves on their own—they're liable to a lot of temptations, aren't they?" "Oh, I dun'no," I said. "Yes, they are," she said; "they've no end of temptations, whatever their beginnings may have been, to demean themselves to the level of the common people they're thrown with. And so I thank my God——" she said, "I thank my God I've never yet permitted any man to kiss me—never!" "No man?" I said, naturally curious. "No man," she said; "I thank God," she said, "that I can say that to my husband, whenever he comes along, truthfully." "Mr. Letchmere isn't common," I said, pumping her; "you're not making an exception, then, just now," I said, "in favour of *him*?" The words were hardly out of my mouth before I saw her eyes blazing, pitch-dark as it was—the haughty little puss! "Your acquaintance with the manners of gentlemen is evidently

extremely limited!" she said, and the next thing I heard was the banging of my street-door.

[*There is a brief pause while she fussily signs her gloves to a pocket which she discovers with difficulty at the bottom of her skirt.*

MARION.

I'm glad. She has ceased chattering to me; she thinks I'm unsympathetic. I'm glad. Still, all that doesn't prove that Letty's husband is to take the form of Mr. Letchmere, does it?

HILDA.

[*Seating herself on the left of the table on the right.*] It's a good sign—a jolly good sign.

MARION.

It isn't as though Mr. Letchmere is a silly boy, Hilda. He's a man of—what?—thirty? And it's no very uncommon occurrence for a selfish fellow of his age and position to allow himself to be fascinated and diverted for a while by a girl of the Letty sort——

HILDA.

The Letty sort!

MARION.

Intensely pleasure-loving; a girl whose face beams like a kid's at the idea of a dance, a theatre, the most trivial amusement. I can quite understand the attraction such a nature has for a certain order of man, and no harm need come of it if only the man is fairly decent, and the girl is cute enough to accept

his devotions for what they are worth. But marriage——!

[A paper-knife lies upon the smaller table.
HILDA picks it up and trims her nails with
it as she talks.

HILDA.

Ouf! how you preach! *Noo verrong*, as Ma Watkins is fond of observing; *noo verrong*!

MARION.

No, when it comes to matrimony, my dear, it isn't a Letty your gentleman makes for—your gentleman who has got over his calf-days—however circumspect and well-conducted some of his Letties may have shown themselves. In marrying, he is careful to select a person from his own sphere; and the Letties have the gratification of eventually meeting him promenading Bond Street or Piccadilly accompanied by a stylish, inanimate scrag with no hips to speak of and a beaky nose.

HILDA.

I should describe Letty as stylish, in spite of her clothes being distinctly *magasang*. And she's what you'd term a lady, by rights.

MARION.

[*Rising.*] In Mr. Letchmere's sense!

HILDA.

Her father was a solicitor.

MARION.

[*Walking away.*] Struck off the rolls for something or another.

HILDA.

Well, so are heaps of solicitors.

MARION.

[*Looking out of the further window.*] At any rate, the sooner Mr. Letchmere plays Prince Charming, or tires of his sport, the better. You'll grant that?

HILDA.

[*Laying the paper-knife aside.*] By Jove, yes! She's getting herself into a pretty pickle in the meantime —what! She's been borrowing money right and left, hasn't she?

MARION.

Don't ask me.

HILDA.

Oh, I know for a fact that she's loaned a fiver from the little oddment who has the floor under mine——

MARION.

The photographer.

HILDA.

Dick Perry, the photographer. [*Rising and moving to the table on the left.*] And I've a shrewd notion she's touched Ordish and young Neale for a trifle.

MARION.

[*Leaving the window.*] Yes, I'm afraid she is dreadfully in debt——

HILDA.

[*Taking up a decanter of red wine, and sniffing its contents anxiously.*] It's all right ; I thought it might have been claret.

MARION.

[*At the table on the right.*] And ill—ill into the bargain.

HILDA.

[*Replacing the decanter.*] Ill ?

MARION.

I didn't mention it to *him*—but when she returned home an hour ago, after rushing out for her hat, she quite frightened me. If she hadn't clung on to the chest of drawers——! [*Sitting, behind the table on the right.*] I called on the doctor on my way here ; that's why I sneaked off without her.

HILDA.

Doctor ?

MARION.

She's as weak as a rat, Hilda. Can you be surprised ? She has been half-starving herself ever since she has been friendly with him.

HILDA.

[*Opening her eyes widely for the first time.*] Starving herself !

MARION.

Almost every penny—money earned and money borrowed—has been spent upon her back these last two or three weeks.

HILDA.

[*Advancing to MARION, awe-stricken.*] Great Scot ! I'm hanged if I could go as far as that, much as I might be spoons on a chap.

MARION.

You couldn't.

HILDA.

A girl ought always to remember what she owes to herself, I consider. [*Going to the settee on the right and comfortably settling herself among the pillows.*] Why, even to-day I've had my usual—though I've provided a thick tea for my party and guessed there'd be light refreshment here.

MARION.

Your usual tinned lobster and pound of moist strawberries, and your big bottle of stout, I suppose ? Ha !

MARION.

[*Severely.*] I don't see what there is to titter at.

[*The outer-door bell rings.*

MARION.

[*Rising.*] Hark !

HILDA.

[*Putting her feet upon the settee.*] But there, one mustn't blame her. She's got to look her best, by hook or by crook. It's her chance.

MARION.

[*Listening at the door on the left.*] Her chance. I wonder !

HILDA.

[*Complacently*] What a romance it would be! The little hussy—I hope to goodness it comes off!

MARION.

[*Opening the door suddenly and calling.*] Letty

[*She darts away, along the corridor, returning immediately with LETTY SHELL—a slender but well-shaped girl, with a skin that is almost colourless. The transparent whiteness of her high brow and thin cheeks is heightened by the glow of her eyes, which are dark and eager, and the extraordinary redness of her full lips. She wears a frock of flowered muslin, a large hat, and a ruffle of soft material flowing from her shoulders.*

MARION.

[*To LETTY.*] Mr. Letchmere has been obliged to go out for a quarter-of-an-hour. We're to ask you to excuse him.

LETTY.

I'm punctual, aren't I? he's not cross?

MARION.

Cross—no. A pressing matter, he called it.

LETTY.

[*Running to HILDA, and kissing her.*] How are you
—[*in a whisper*] huffy with me for being short with
you last night?

HILDA.

Stand up.

LETTY.

[*Displaying her dress.*] Well——?

HILDA.

Not bad.

LETTY.

[*Mischievously.*] Rather *magasin*, eh?

HILDA.

Oh, it's all very fine——!

[*Discovering the preparations for the feast,*
LETTY advances to the table breathlessly.

LETTY.

Oh ! oh ! [*Reading the inscription.*] “Letty. Many Happy Returns of the Day”—of my birthday ! [*Sitting at the table, first in one chair, then in another.*] How excessively kind of Mr. Letchmere ! What a superb cake !

HILDA.

[*With her drawl.*] More like a wedding-cake.

LETTY.

Isn't it——! [*In some confusion.*] Do look at these roses ! This is real old Venetian glass——!

HILDA.

If you take my advice, you'll keep quiet. You've been feeling queer already, I hear.

LETTY.

[*Rising and facing MARION.*] You haven't told Mr. Letchmere?

MARION.

No.

LETTY

[*Flutteringly.*] Men dislike the idea of sickly women.

MARION.

It's entirely your own fault if you *are* sickly.

LETTY.

[*Passing her hands over her face.*] Ha! there's the advantage of belonging to the pallid order of humanity —your appearance doesn't give you away.

MARION.

Don't deceive yourself, my dear; only yesterday I overheard Mr. Mandeville putting questions about you to that woman who sits at the desk behind mine.

LETTY

About me?

MARION.

He's curious to know what the devil ails you.

LETTY.

Impertinence!

MARION.

The colour isn't so continually in those red lips of yours as it used to be, he has noticed.

LETTY.

[*Moving towards HILDA with her head in the air.*] The cad !

HILDA.

Mandeville ? He's the member of your firm who makes a pet of you, isn't he ?

LETTY.

Ah, be silent ! [*Sitting, on the left of the table on the right.*] For mercy's sake, let us banish the horrid shop for a few hours ! [*Removing her ruffle and exhibiting it to HILDA.*] I bought this at Floyd's summer-sale. If you turn up your nose at it—— !

MARION.

[*On the left.*] We earn our bread-and-butter at the "horrid shop"; while we do that we might refrain from abusing the berth.

LETTY.

[*Laying the ruffle aside.*] La, la, la ! here's Polly on her platform again !

HILDA.

[*Drowsily.*] No squabbling ; the weather's too hot.

LETTY.

I apologise, Polly. [*Taking off her gloves.*] Certainly we oughtn't to be so wicked as to speak slightlying of Dugdale's. Oh, no ; not by no means ! On the contrary, we should fall down and worship the picturesque mahogany counter behind which we pursue our useful

and elevating toil. We ought even to admire the tall man in the artistic chocolate-and-gold livery who guards the sacred portals. And, above all, we should reverence the beautiful flat feet and the dulcet tones of Mr. Mike Cohen with his “good mornin’, young ladieth!” ; and the pretty broken-English of Mr. Hammerstein ; and the variegated waistcoats, and the eternal white spats and varnished boots, of Mr. Bernard Mandeville! [*Putting her gloves upon the table and rearranging the details of her costume.*] La, la, la !

MARIION.

The atmosphere of Dugdale’s isn’t the most savoury, I confess. But you dwell too much on externals, Letty. If you were employed elsewhere you’d be irritated to the same degree.

LETTY.

[*Lightly.*] I daresay.

MARIION.

Whereas good health, and the work to do, are the great essentials.

LETTY.

To my imperfect intelligence, it seems that the first essential is to be capable of resigning one’s-self to a scheme of things which ordains that some women shall spend their lives in perpetual fag while others—our more fortunate sisters, as they are styled—enjoy freedom and luxury galore. Well, Polly dear, you *are* so constituted ; you are content to find yourself rattling your chains every, every, every morning at nine-thirty, fine or foggy——!

MARION.

The prospect doesn't scare me, since I'm in for it.

LETTY.

Exactly, but I—I'm different. My sins ! once I was certain I was doomed to grow old as an office-drudge I——[with a catch in her breath] I'd throw myself on my bed and deliberately perish ! I wouldn't stir again ; I'd just lie there and cease to breathe !

[Rising, she returns to the table on the left, and stands taking in the pretty objects upon it with sparkling eyes.

HILDA.

[Rousing herself and yawning, good-humouredly.]
Hear, hear ! What's that ?

LETTY.

Oh, but I've always felt convinced I was born to a full share of the joys of this world ! Even the smash at home didn't shake that belief. [Involuntarily glancing round the room.] Ah—h—h !

MARION.

[Watching her narrowly.] What is your definite notion of the joys of this world, Letty ?

LETTY.

[Laughing evasively.] Ha, ha, ha ! It doesn't embrace cold-shouldering the chums of one's struggling days. That isn't in the programme. [Linking her arm in MARION's affectionately.] Remember, you two, I'm not the girl to forget—when my star does shine !

[Extending a hand to HILDA.] Neither of you would give me the go-by if good luck came your way—

[The door on the left opens, and NEVILL enters briskly. He comes to LETTY and takes her hands, his voice softening to the tender note when he addresses her.

NEVILL.

My dear child, you must think me very discourteous. I hope Marion and Hilda have explained——

LETTY.

Yes. It doesn't matter. It's so sweet of you to be troubled with us at all.

NEVILL.

[Pointing to the cake.] The sleepless nights this has cost me! And its beauties have been discounted during my absence!

LETTY.

[At the table.] You won't cut it!

HILDA.

Why, it would only spoil.

NEVILL.

[Going to a cabinet.] And fortunately there are souvenirs of a more enduring kind.

[He produces from the cabinet three small cases of jewellery. Selecting one, he presents it to LETTY.

NEVILL.

[As he does so.] Many Happy Returns of the Day!

LETTY.

[Falteringly.] Mr. Letchmere——!

NEVILL.

[Offering one of the remaining boxes to MARION.] You never confide in me, Marion, but I suspect that you also indulge in a birthday at annually recurrent dates, in a serious fashion.

MARION.

I—I'd prefer not——

NEVILL.

Cruel!

HILDA.

[Shocked.] Marion!

MARI .

[Accepting the box reluctantly,] Oh, if you——
[moving away]. I am exceedingly obliged to you.

NEVILL

[Giving the third box to HILDA.] Hilda——?

HILDA.

[Taking it promptly.] Thanks. It is nice of you.
[Opening the box.] Oh, just what I wanted!

NEVILL.

[To LETTY—pointing to a mirror standing upon the piano.] There's a mirror——

[*LETTY has opened her box and has been gazing at a brooch it contains. She now crosses the room, and, with the aid of the mirror, fastens the brooch at her throat.*

HILDA.

[*Consigning her box, with a liberal display of silk petticoat, to her pocket—to NEVILL.] I sha'n't, till I get home; I'm not going to risk dropping mine.*

NEVILL.

[*Indicating a chair.] Will you sit here?*

HILDA.

[*Seating herself.] Anywhere.*

NEVILL.

[*Pointing to the settee.] Marion——? [MARION takes her place silently.] We'll drink Letty's health in red wine, and afterwards atone for our excess in iced coffee.*

HILDA.

[*Her elbows on the table.] Letty cuts the cake, I suppose?*

NEVILL.

[*Picking up a knife.] Certainly, as heroine of the occasion. [Turning to LETTY.] Letty——*

[*He finds her seated upon the settee on the right, with grey lips. Her eyes are closed, her hands lie helplessly in her lap, and her bosom is heaving.*

NEVILL.

[*Dropping the knife, and advancing to her.*] Letty !
 [Taking her hand.] Letty——!

[*She struggles to her feet and sways ; he catches her.* HILDA and MARION rise and come to them.]

MARION.

Give her to me. [*Supporting LETTY.*] I've got you—
 Marion—Polly——

NEVILL.

[To HILDA.] Water.

[HILDA returns to the table, and pours water from a carafe into a tumbler.]

MARION.

[*Placing LETTY in a chair.*] She will be better in a moment.

NEVILL.

The heat in this room is insufferable. My man must have neglected to lower the sun-blinds. [*Taking up the scent-spray.*] Her hat——

[MARION removes LETTY's hat while HILDA administers the water.]

NEVILL.

Poor little lady ! how unfortunate !

[*He sprays her brow. She raises a hand feebly with a gasp.*

MARION.

Letty——

HILDA.

Dear old girl——

[She opens her eyes and looks about her.]

NEVILL.

That's right.

[She gets upon her feet again with the help of MARION.]

LETTY.

*[After a pause.] Ah! . . . Ah! . . . [To NEVILL, smiling.] I beg your pardon. [Dropping her head upon MARION's shoulder.] Polly——!**[The bell of the outer door is heard.]*

MARION.

This is her second attack of faintness to-day. Let her be quite quiet for a little while; then I'll take her home.

NEVILL.

*[Going to the library door.] It's cooler in here.**[MARION, carrying LETTY's hat and collecting the rest of her belongings, leads her towards the library.]*

LETTY.

[Weakly.] What a fool I am!

NEVILL.

[To MARION.] I'll have a cab waiting.

MARION.

Thank you.

[MARION and LETTY enter the library and disappear. NEVILL crosses to the mantelpiece and rings the bell.

HILDA.

[*Lingering ruefully.*] This is an upset, upon my word.

NEVILL.

[*At the table on the left, surveying the spread.*] Symbolic of life, my dear Hilda—save that, as a rule, the regret follows the cutting of the cake——! But why shouldn't we drink to Letty——?

HILDA.

Eh?

NEVILL.

You and I?

HILDA.

[*With alacrity.*] The merest sip, then.

[*She closes the library door softly and joins him, seating herself with her back to the door on the left.*

NEVILL.

[*Sitting, on the right of the table, and pouring out wine.*] That ghastly piece of confectionery—if it pursued her to Langham Street you could hack away at it at your tea-party, eh?

HILDA.

Rather! [*Checking herself.*] It might soften her disappointment, mightn't it?

NEVILL.

[*Raising his glass.*] The toast is Letty !

HILDA.

She did turn a colour. [*Raising her glass.*] Letty !
[*They drink, she with gusto.*]

HILDA.

[*With conviction.*] Port's my wine. [*He refills her glass.*] Whatever are you doing ? [*Raising her glass again.*] Letty ! [*Looking at him out of the corner of her eye.*] And a good husband to her when the time comes !

[*Rugg appears, at the door on the left, carrying a card on a salver. He observes the absence of the others with some surprise.*]

NEVILL.

[*To Rugg, sharply.*] You have allowed this room to get as hot as hell.

RUGG.

Extremely sorry, sir. I should hardly say it was as warm as all that.

NEVILL.

We'll not discuss the point. You will have ample opportunity of testing the accuracy of the simile at some future date. A four-wheeler.

[*Instead of leaving the room, Rugg closes the door and comes to Nevill.*]

NEVILL.

What——?

RUGG.

[*Handing the card.*] Called twice before to-day, sir, but wouldn't give his name till this moment.

[NEVILL reads the card, at first carelessly, then with an air of interest.]

NEVILL.

Does he state his business?

RUGG.

No, sir. Wishes to know when you could favour him with a few minutes' conversation; that's all.

NEVILL.

Civil?

RUGG.

Perfectly, sir.

NEVILL.

[*After a brief pause.*] If he should present himself again, and I happen to be disengaged—

RUGG.

He's here now, sir, if you'd like to appoint a time—

HILDA.

[*Rising.*] I'll join the other ladies.

[*She drains her glass and moves towards the library door; NEVILL follows her.*

NEVILL.

[*To HILDA.*] I've a slight curiosity to see this gentleman. He'll not detain me long. I'll come to you directly he has left me.

[She nods and disappears into the library, closing the door behind her. Noiselessly NEVILL locks the door and draws the portière across it. Then, coming upon HILDA's sunshade, he thrusts it out of sight and returns to RUGG.

NEVILL.

[Coolly.] Interrupt me in five minutes at the outside.

RUGG.

Very good, sir.

[As RUGG withdraws, NEVILL goes to the table on the left and drops a serviette over the cake. Presently RUGG re-enters, followed by BERNARD MANDEVILLE—a big, coarse-featured man, of about five-and-thirty, with a heavy moustache, which he pulls at frequently, and an uneasy swagger. He is loudly dressed, has a large flower in his button-hole, and wears his hair plastered in decorative fashion upon his forehead. RUGG disappears, closing the door.

MANDEVILLE.

Pawdon the intrusion. Haw! Mr. Letchmere?

NEVILL.

[On the right, referring to the card.] Mr. Mandeville?

MANDEVILLE.

[Clearing his throat assentingly and shooting his cuffs.] Haw! Lucky to find you in town, sir. So

many of us make a bolt of it at the week-end now-a-days. [*Eyeing the table on the left.*] I'm not disturbing you at your—haw ! ?——

NEVILL.

Not at all. I've just been giving a little birthday entertainment to a young nephew of mine. Anything I can do for you, Mr. Mandeville ?

MANDEVILLE.

Haw ! well, there *is*, since you put it in that way. I—haw ! —fancy you're familiar with the name of my firm ?

NEVILL.

[*Again referring to the card.*] Your firm ?

MANDEVILLE.

That's my private residence—Acacia Road——

NEVILL.

St. John's Wood.

MANDEVILLE.

Regent's Pawk. But I'm one of the principals of Dugdale's——

NEVILL.

Dugdale's ?

MANDEVILLE.

Waterloo Place.

NEVILL.

Ah, yes. You're outside brokers, aren't you ? [*Pleasantly.*] There was an interesting case in the

newspapers a week or two ago in which you were involved.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Depositing his hat and cane upon a chair on the left.*] Haw ! our action against Lady Bretton. The disreputable old faggot had the impudence to repudiate her liability to us—pleaded the gambling act—

NEVILL

And the jury were unsympathetic towards you, if I recollect.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Turning a chair to face NEVILL.*] Faugh ! However, it'll take more than that to make Dugdale's go phut. [Sitting.] Dugdale's is a big thing, Mr. Letchmere.

NEVILL.

I've no doubt.

MANDEVILLE

And that brings us to the—haw !—little matter upon which I desiah to speak to you.

NEVILL

Ah ?

MANDEVILLE.

[*Significantly.*] I believe you are awaah, sir, that it's our custom in Waterloo Place to employ a considerable number of—haw !—female clerks ?

NEVILL.

[*Unconcernedly taking a cigarette from his case, and then offering the case to MANDEVILLE.*] A cigarette ?

MANDEVILLE.

Thanks [*Producing a large cigar.*] 'Scuse me. I promised a friend o' mine I'd sawmple this weed. [*Exhibiting it.*] Flor de Cuba—eighty-two shillings.

NEVILL.

[*Giving him a match.*] Plenty for the money.

MANDEVILLE.

You're right. I dare say I could put my hand upon a small parcel of these if you—haw! ahem! [*Igniting the match upon his trousers.*] Yes, sir, a considerable number of female clerks——

NEVILL.

[*Sitting, on the right, and lighting his cigarette.*] Who have very liberal, indulgent employers, I'm sure, Mr. Mandeville.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Biting off the end of his cigar.*] Haw! We pay 'em top salaries—beyond their mawket value. [*Regarding Nevill steadily as he lights his cigar.*] And they're not only over-paid but damned well looked after, Mr. Letchmere.

NEVILL.

Looked after?

MANDEVILLE.

Supervised. We're white men at Dugdale's, sir. We take an active interest in the moral and general welfare of our gals. [*Getting rid of the end of his match by throwing it under his chair.*] See what I mean?

NEVILL.

Admirable ! What, frankly, I *don't* see for the moment——

MANDEVILLE.

Well, this is where you come in, Mr. Letchmere. You've lately struck up an acquaintance with a young person—[pulling at his moustache] haw !—one of our staff—Letty—Letty Shell——

NEVILL.

[*Flicking the ash from his cigarette.*] Oh ? And how have you contrived to acquire that item of knowledge ? Ah, yes ! your active interest in the moral and general welfare——

MANDEVILLE.

Purely accidentally, sir. We're not spies at Dugdale's, if that's what you insinuate.

NEVILL.

My dear Mr. Mandeville !

MANDEVILLE.

I—haw !—I've suspected something was up with the gal ; but it wasn't till yesterday, when a fellow-clerk of Letty's brought me the tale——

NEVILL.

The tale ?

MANDEVILLE.

That the **minx** was carrying-on with a young swell

living in rooms here—it wasn't till yesterday that I moved in the affair personally.

NEVILL.

Moved?—

MANDEVILLE.

Made a few inquiries—

NEVILL.

As to the—[with a wry face] swell?

MANDEVILLE.

I looked upon it—haw!—as my duty to sift the rumour.

NEVILL.

I see.

MANDEVILLE.

But I haven't breathed a word to her on the subject. I preferred to come to you direct, sir—man to man, gentleman to gentleman, Mr. Letchmere.

NEVILL.

[Affably.] And very prudent and scrupulous of you. Very discreet and punctilious of you, indeed.

MANDEVILLE.

[Unbending.] Oh, I don't say, sir, that it's anything more on your part than a bit of a frolic—*pour passer le temps*, don'tcherknow. I'm a man of honour myself, and with me every other gentleman is a man of honour till I find him out. That's my system—Berny Mandeville's system—

NEVILL.

One that reveals a generous character, Mr. Mandeville.

MANDEVILLE.

But what you're doing, motive or no motive, aint beneficial to the gal.

NEVILL.

No? You pain me.

MANDEVILLE.

She's a respectable gal enough, but you can't class her with the common-or-garden office Miss who's happy and content on three evenings a week at a Polytechnic and a long bike-ride on Sundays. She's alive all over, is Letty. And a girl of her tastes and inclinations can't stand being petted and spoiled and made a duchess of. She gets beyond herself, loses her head, forgets which side her bread's buttered. See what I mean?

NEVILL.

Nothing could be more explicit.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Flatteringly.*] Haw! I felt pretty certain I'd only to give a gentleman like you a gentle hint. *You* don't want to spoil the stoopid little jade's opportunities—why should you?—

NEVILL.

Opportunities?

MANDEVILLE.

Queer her prospects—

NEVILL.

Prospects! Big sounding words, aren't they, Mr. Mandeville, to apply to the condition of a young lady who drops a paltry five-and-twenty shillings into her purse every Saturday and is already remunerated beyond her market value?

MANDEVILLE.

[*Uncomfortably.*] Haw! Well, she may have prospects outside the office. [Pulling at his moustache again.] I don't go to the extent of saying she *has*, mark you—

NEVILL.

[*Searchingly.*] Outside the office?

MANDEVILLE

[*His uneasiness increasing.*] Oh, I've no objection to own up, if it'll clear the air—

NEVILL.

Own up?

MANDEVILLE.

Has Letty—er—ever let out to you, by any chawnce, that she's—haw!—rather a favourite of mine?

NEVILL.

I think I do recall a remark of Miss Shell's to the effect that she feared she monopolised more than a fair share of moral supervision at the hands of a member of your firm.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Sulkily.*] Cheeky little baggage! That's her funny way of expressing herself—[*rising*] Oh, damn it—as one gentleman to another—I—I've a strong partiality for the gal! There, now you've got it straight!

NEVILL.

[*After a short silence, during which MANDEVILLE stands glaring into space—dryly.*] I appreciate warmly the privilege of being in your confidence, Mr. Mandeville——

MANDEVILLE.

Yes, it's between ourselves, of course.

NEVILL.

[*Getting upon his feet indolently.*] But have you yet conveyed to Miss Shell, in a formal manner, the sentiments of your tender regard, may I ask?

MANDEVILLE.

Er—haw!—not yet.

NEVILL.

[*With a satirical raising of the brows.*] Not!

MANDEVILLE

That's a business requiring—haw!—a good deal of—haw!—consideration.

NEVILL.

Consideration?

MANDEVILLE.

[*Worrying his moustache once more.*] When a gal's beneath you in the social scale—a clerk in your office—see what I mean——?

EVILL.

Clearly. And pending your solution of these misgivings, you propose that I should——

MANDEVILLE.

Keep off the grass. Keep off the grass.

NEVILL.

[*With an ugly smile.*] To make way for you? [*Looking at his watch.*] To make way for you.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Beginning to bluster.*] Haw! Why not, sir? At all events, I am qualified to tell her I'm fairly gone on her—honourably gone on her—if I choose to do it.

NEVILL.

Qualified?

MANDEVILLE.

Which is more than you are, Mr. Letchmere. I am a single man; you aint, bear in mind.

NEVILL.

[*Imperturbably.*] Very true. Your statement of our relative positions is a marvel of lucidity. So clear is it, my dear Mr. Mandeville, that upon reflection you must perceive how illogical your present attitude

is. Surely the fact that Miss Letty is a strictly virtuous young woman, and that I am, from force of circumstance, debarred from standing upon any footing with her but one of friendship——

MANDEVILLE.

A pretty friend for a virtuous gal—a feller separated from his wife——!

NEVILL.

Surely there is nothing in this fact to act as a deterrent to your honourable advances—advances obviously flattering to the lady. Go ahead, therefore, my good sir; bring your courting, at your own proper time, to its legitimate and, I trust, propitious climax. But meanwhile—pray allow me the reminder—meanwhile the slightest attempt at interference in Miss Shell's private affairs is a gross, an unwarrantable impertinence.

MANDEVILLE.

Oh, that's your tone, is it——!

[*The door on the left opens, and RUGG enters, carrying NEVILL's hat and gloves. Having presented the hat and gloves to NEVILL, the man retires to the corridor.*]

MANDEVILLE.

Haw! [*Taking up his hat and cane.*] Well, I've given you the opportunity of behaving as a gentleman, Mister Letchmere——

NEVILL.

You speak as if such opportunities were rare, Mr. Mandeville. They occur daily.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Advancing to NEVILL.*] By James, though, she shall hear a few pleasant stories I've picked up concerning you, and don't you forget it!

NEVILL.

They will lose little in the narration. Good afternoon.

MANDEVILLE.

[*At a loss.*] Haw—! I—oh, you be—! Good-day.

[*He goes out, followed by RUGG. Laying his hat and gloves aside, NEVILL sits upon the settee on the right.*

NEVILL.

[*To himself, between his teeth.*] That brute ! that hog !

[*The outer door slams and RUGG returns.*

RUGG.

The cab's here, sir.

NEVILL.

See that the ladies haven't to pay the man's fare.

RUGG.

Yes, sir.

[*RUGG withdraws, closing the door, and NEVILL, first drawing back the portière, unlocks the library door and knocks softly. Presently MARION shows herself.*

NEVILL.

How is she?

MARIION.

[*Calling.*] Letty——!

[*LETTY appears, dressed for departure, and enters the room with MARIION.*]

LETTY.

[*To NEVILL, smilingly.*] I am so ashamed. After your great kindness! [*Giving him her hand.*] Let me run away and hide myself.

NEVILL.

[*Retaining her hand.*] The colour is in your lips again. Why need you——?

LETTY.

[*Fretfully.*] I've promised Marion I'll lie down for an hour. [*To MARIION.*] Do wake Hilda. [*To NEVILL.*] She has fallen fast asleep, the lazy-bones.

[*MARIION returns to the library. NEVILL and LETTY talk in subdued voices.*]

NEVILL.

[*Pointing to the cake.*] The cake—the egregious bun——

LETTY.

You must eat it in solitude, thinking of me. Not as you saw me over there——!

NEVILL.

It is to grace Hilda's tea-table. What do you say to my bringing it to Langham Street myself?

LETTY.

You! [*In a flutter.*] How flattered they would all be!

NEVILL.

Oh, bother her party! I look to you to manage that we are left alone, my dear.

LETTY.

[*Her eyes drooping under his gaze.*] Ha, ha! As if we were never——!

NEVILL.

Yes, but this evening I've something important— [*placing his hands upon her shoulders*] especially important——

LETTY.

[*Finding he does not continue—almost inaudibly.*] Have you . . . ? I'll try

[*Suddenly, impelled by an impulse of passion, he draws her to him and kisses her upon the lips.*

LETTY.

[*Startled.*] Mr. Letchmere . . . ! Oh . . . Mr. Letchmere . . . !

NEVILL.

Sssh!

[*MARION re-enters with HILDA, who is half-awake. MARION is arranging HILDA's hat and tidying her generally.*

NEVILL.

[*Opening the door on the left.*] Come; Marion will

scold if I detain you. [Returning to LETTY and giving her his arm formally.] Allow me to put you into your cab.

[They go out, MARION accompanying them.

HILDA.

[Gaping.] Oh—h—h! My sunshade? Here, where's my—? [Discovering it.] I've got it—

[She follows the others, but pauses at the table on the left to give a last look at the birthday-feast. She is about to turn away when she succumbs to the temptation of helping herself to a handful of sweetmeats and cramming them into her mouth. Finally she grabs at a peach and departs, diving for her pocket, as the curtain falls.

END OF THE FIRST ACT.

THE SECOND ACT

The scene represents the roof of the house in which HILDA GUNNING lodges in Langham Street. At the back is a low parapet-wall; beyond are other house-tops, and, in the distance, the steeple of the church in Langham Place and an extensive prospect of London as seen in the golden light of late afternoon. On the right a chimney-stack and a dwarf wall mark the division between Miss GUNNING's residence and the adjoining premises. On the left the roof slopes up to meet a similar dwarf wall and chimney-stack which separate LETTY's house from HILDA'S. In this slope is an open skylight; while, further to the left, a portion of the roof of LETTY's house is shown including a little dormer window.

A windsor-chair stands by the parapet-wall at the back, and upon the wall an old, coloured rug is thrown so as to provide a seat. On the right, nearer the spectator, are a basket-chair which has seen its best days and a wooden stool; on the left, upon the slope, a square of worn carpet, a pillow, and some dog-eared "novelettes" and magazines. A few pots of flowers partially relieve the griminess of the surroundings.

[ORDISH and NEALE are seated at the back, the one upon the parapet wall, the other upon the windsor-chair, playing cards and smoking their pipes. ORDISH is a bearded, sallow, saturnine man of forty, lean of figure and not very prosperous in appearance. He wears a black frock-coat, a pair of shrunken flannel trousers, and sand-shoes. NEALE is a fair, impudent-looking young fellow dressed in a suit of tweed of a gay pattern. On the right, RICHARD PERRY—a simple, kindly, consequential little person of thirty or thereabouts, with a forehead of abnormal development topped by an extravagant quantity of mouse-coloured hair—is adjusting a camera upon a folding stand; while MARION is sitting upon the square of carpet turning the pages of a magazine. The church-bells strike the three-quarters-of-an-hour, whereupon she jumps up and, going to the dwarf wall on the left, looks towards the dormer window.

NEALE.

[Surveying a hand of cards which ORDISH has dealt him.] Pass!

ORDISH.

[Throwing his cards down.] Oh, pass!

NEALE.

Treble.

ORDISH.

[Gloomily.] This is becoming serious.

NEALE.

[*Shuffling.*] It is so, cockey.

[HILDA's head appears, emerging from the sky-light.]

HILDA.

I say ! what are we waiting for ?

NEALE.

Letty.

PERRY.

Miss Shell.

NEALE.

[To ORDISH.] Cut.

HILDA.

[*Clambering on to the roof with the aid of PERRY.*] Where is she ? You must be sinking for your teas, all of you. [To MARION.] It's too bad.

MARION.

[*Making signs to HILDA.*] Hilda——

[PERRY returns to his camera and HILDA joins MARION.]

HILDA.

Eh ?

MARION.

[*In a whisper.*] Dr. Pollard is with her.

HILDA.

Oh——

MARION.

You make a start. I think I'll hang about the landing in case I'm wanted.

[She transfers herself to the roof of her own house, and lets herself in at the dormer window.

ORDISH.

[Calling his hand.] Misery !

NEALE.

You look it. Nap !

ORDISH.

[Bitterly.] Oh, of course.

PERRY.

I trust I shall be permitted to take my picture, Miss Gunning, before we attempt to do justice to your bountiful hospitality.

HILDA.

Before !

PERRY.

The light will not serve us subsequently. Pending the arrival of the lagging guest, why shouldn't we roughly design our grouping ? [Shifting the camera.] I anticipate most excellent results.

ORDISH.

[Playing a card.] You can't do it, Neale.

NEALE.

[Annoyed.] What d'ye mean by crying *Misère* with a blooming king in your hand ?

ORDISH.

You've failed to make your Nap ; let that suffice.

NEALE.

All right ; there's no occasion to shout about it.

PERRY.

[*To ORDISH and NEALE.*] Gentlemen, may I trouble you ?

NEALE.

[*Rising, facetiously.*] Oh, please, is my hair quite tidy ?

ORDISH.

[*Also rising—to NEALE.*] Let me see—you are now my debtor to a trifling amount.

NEALE.

Heart alive, I'm not going to fly the country ! [*To PERRY.*] Where do I stand ? Mind, it's a stipulation I come out handsome !

PERRY.

[*Advancing.*] I suggest that Miss Gunning embodies the classic conception of Venus rising from the sea ; in other words, that she should be shown issuing from the skylight—just the head and shoulders——

HILDA.

[*Who has been tying her shoe-laces.*] What next ! half my gown would be hidden !

PERRY.

[*Perplexed.*] Yes, it does entail that drawback. I have it ! [*To HILDA, pointing to the square of carpet.*] Be good enough to take your position there. [She

follows his directions.] Mr. Ordish—Mr. Neale—kindly place yourselves at Miss Gunning's feet.

[*They seat themselves accordingly.*

NEALE.

[*Gazing languishingly at HILDA.*] May I adopt an adoring attitude?

HILDA.

[*Calmly.*] Don't be a stupid goat, Mr. Neale, if you can help it.

[*MARION and LETTY are seen at the dormer window.*

MARION.

[*Calling.*] Hilda!

HILDA.

Halloo?

MARION.

[*Assisting LETTY to scramble through the window-opening.*] We're coming.

LETTY.

[*Merrily.*] Always be last at a party if you aim at creating a sensation.

NEALE.

[*Hurrying to the dwarf wall and giving LETTY a hand.*] All aboard! all aboard!

LETTY.

Many thanks.

[*ORDISH also rises to greet her and she shakes hands with him. Her eyes sparkle restlessly and her manner indicates nerves at full tension.*

LETTY.

How are you, Mr. Ordish? [Shaking hands with PERRY.] Good evening. [Seeing the camera.] Ah, yes, we're to sit for our portraits, aren't we? [Going to HILDA.] I am dreadfully sorry, dear, really.

PERRY.

[Clapping his hands.] Now, now, the group! Miss Allardyce on Miss Gunning's left, Miss Shell on her right. [MARIION and LETTY take the places allotted to them.] Gentlemen, resume your positions. [The men squat again.] Ah, ah! you grasp my conceit? The three Graces! [Disappearing beneath his focusing cloth.] The three Graces!

NEALE.

There are four, with Ordish.

HILDA.

[Kicking him gently in the back.] Do shut up.

PERRY.

[Reappearing.] Miss Allardyce's arm round Miss Gunning's waist—[disappearing] I am obliged.

NEALE.

[Hugging himself.] Eugh! I've no lady. What am I to do with my arms?

ORDISH.

You couldn't contrive to hide your mug behind 'em, could you?

NEALE.

Jimmy, this is going to be one of your witty evenings.

PERRY.

[Reappearing.] Miss Shell's hand caressingly upon Miss Gunning's shoulder—

LETTY.

Willingly.

PERRY.

[Disappearing.] I am obliged.

HILDA.

[To LETTY, quietly.] What does the doctor say?

LETTY.

[Turning her head aside quickly.] Sssh, sshh!

PERRY.

[Reappearing once more and proceeding to insert his dark slide.] Ladies—Mr. Ordish—Mr. Neale—I have pleasure, and pride, in informing you that there is every prospect of my obtaining an effective picture, a strikingly beautiful picture—

NEALE.

Spare my blushes!

PERRY.

[Standing before the camera.] Only one word, and that on the subject of Expression, Facial Expression—the disposition, in short, of the facial muscles. You will have observed—your experience will have taught you—that it is the practice of the majority of professed artists in photography to instruct their sitters

to smile—to—ah—look pleasant—irrespective of the mental condition of the, probably, unhappy subjects of their operations. My methods are totally different. Smile, even radiantly, if you can do so with a semblance of spontaneity. But, for heaven's sake, let us not have a mechanical smile; let us not have a smile which recalls too vividly the "guinea set" of the cheap dentist's show-case.

[*MARION and LETTY laugh.*]

HILDA.

[*Absently.*] I hope that fool of a woman is keeping the tea-cake hot.

PERRY.

No, the injunction I would impose on you is this—*think!* Exercise the faculty of imagination! Conjure up delightful illusions, and suffer them to reflect themselves upon your physiognomies. Mr. Ordish, for instance—representing, as he does, that important institution, the Penguin Life and Fire Insurance Company—I ask him to imagine that he has this afternoon induced some provident person to insure his life for five thousand pounds.

ORDISH.

Ten quid on the life of a poor, rickety baby, Perry—that's more my mark.

PERRY.

Yes, yes, but fancy the other event has occurred.
[*With animation.*] Five thousand pounds! What a fat commission, hey?

ORDISH.

[*With a hollow laugh.*] Ho!

PERRY.

That's right! that's right! Hold it, man, hold it! And you, Mr. Neale—than whom, I am sure, Messrs. Deane and Bosanquet have no traveller they esteem more warmly—my eye, the tremendous orders you booked this morning!

NEALE.

[Loweringly.] I had a jolly fine rumpus with the guv'nors this morning. Beasts!

PERRY.

Dismiss the reollection—imagine they showered compliments upon you. Miss Allardyce, what are you most in need of?

MARION.

A new bicycle.

PERRY.

You've got it; it's in the basement! Ah, how the plated parts glisten!

MARION.

[Smiling.] Very well.

PERRY.

That's a divine smile! hold it! Miss Gunning?

HILDA.

[With her drawl.] I don't know what I want—every-thing—my tea—

PERRY.

H'm! [Pursing his lips.] We will leave you alone. You shall be the statuesque note in my composition. Miss Shell?

. LETTY.

[*Hastily.*] Pass me. I'll imagine—when the moment comes.

PERRY.

[*Completing his preparations.*] Good. Are you ready? [They nod in unison, then become rigid.] Er—the exposure will be a protracted one. I entertain no objection to your blinking. Blink, by all means. [They do so. He indicates a particular spot upon the chimney-stack on the right.] That cluster of soot upon the chimney-stack—you see it?

THE GROUP.

[*Nodding.*] Um.

PERRY.

Now! Direct your gaze towards that cluster of soot, and think—think of happy things. So! Ready! Hold it! [Humming.] Ta, ra, ta, ta! ta, ra, ta, ta!

[He turns his back upon them and takes his picture.

PERRY.

[After a pause of some seconds, facing them with a wave of the hand.] I am obliged. [They relax, uttering sighs of relief.] Once more. [They stiffen again. He hurriedly makes his preparations for his second picture and then confronts them as before.] Now! [Pausing.] Er—it is sometimes advisable to moisten the lips. You may moisten your lips. [They do so, simultaneously.] Ready! [Pointing to the chimney-stack.] Soot! [Another pause.] Feel happy! Hold it! Ta, ra, ta, ta! ta, ra, ta, ta! [Having taken his second picture.] I am obliged. [Withdrawing the dark slide.] Give me a few minutes and then I will be with you.

HILDA.

[*Resignedly.*] We shall never sit down to our meal at this rate.

[*The group breaks up as PERRY bustles across to the skylight and disappears. LETTY goes to the camera and examines it.*

ORDISH.

[*To NEALE.*] You and I may as well seize the opportunity of settling accounts.

NEALE.

[*Testily.*] Dash it, there can't be much in it, one way or the other !

[*They return to the parapet-wall where they are seen to be engaged over the settlement. HILDA and MARION are watching LETTY.*

HILDA.

[*To MARION.*] She snapped me up when I put the question. [*Observing that the men are occupied.*] I should have thought she would have told you. [*They join LETTY.*] Old girl——

LETTY.

[*Peering into the lens of the camera.*] I am crystal-gazing, divining the future——

HILDA.

You might tell us what old Pollard said to you.

LETTY.

Not now—it's of no consequence—another time —[*Abruptly.*] Oh, one thing he was most emphatic about——

HILDA.

What ?

LETTY.

I am to be out in the air as much as possible—to avoid close rooms. Hilda——?

HILDA.

Yes ?

LETTY.

[*Hesitatingly.*] Don't be wild with me, dear—I wish you would leave me here.

HILDA.

Leave you ?

LETTY.

It's stifling indoors ; one can't breathe, you know, and I—[*frankly*] oh, I mean only till Mr. Letchmere has called. Afterwards, I'll join you all down below.

HILDA.

[*Put out.*] Ho ! is he ordered fresh air, too ? The rest of us aren't select enough for him !

LETTY.

No, no, he's not a snob ; you're perfectly well aware he isn't. [Awkwardly.] But he—he has something to say to me this evening——

HILDA.

[*Opening her eyes.*] To say——?

LETTY.

Of—of importance—and——

HILDA.

Oh—h—h! [Breathlessly.] Letty, is he going to speak?

LETTY.

Sssh! don't be absurd, Hilda!

HILDA.

[Laughing softly.] Ha, ha, ha! [Winking at MARION and then embracing LETTY.] You sly old darling! Nobody shall disturb the turtle-doves. You take it easy. I'll make it right with these chaps——

LETTY.

[Entreatingly.] Hilda, not—chaps! I hate the word.

HILDA.

[In great good humour.] Oh, we are becoming fastidious! [LETTY seats herself in the basket-chair.] Here, you boys!

[NEALE and ORDISH, who have now completed their settlement, come to her, ORDISH carefully putting some money into his purse. MARION has walked away and is standing, in thought, looking down through the skylight.

HILDA.

[To NEALE and ORDISH.] Letty's under the weather, no great shakes. She's not equal to fuggy rooms, and you chaps—you gentlemen have to wait upon her here—understand?

[NEALE, who is in the act of blowing his nose, tucks his handkerchief under his arm and struts about like a waiter.

NEALE.

Coming, miss, coming ! One tea and toast ! One egg, must be fresh !

ORDISH.

[*To NEALE.*] Ah, it's often puzzled me—the career you were born for.

NEALE.

[*Stung.*] It wasn't the box-seat of a hearse, at any rate.

HILDA.

Now then, cease it !

[*As she turns towards the skylight, PERRY's head appears.*

PERRY.

My dear friends, you will rejoice to hear that my prognostications are realised ; the picture will be a remarkable one.

HILDA.

Tea !

[*PERRY's head vanishes and HILDA prepares to descend. She has one foot upon the steps when she withdraws it and calls to PERRY in icy tones.*

HILDA.

Mr. Perry, I'll ask you not to linger at the foot of that ladder.

PERRY.

[*Out of sight.*] I beg your pardon.

[*She descends with the aid of ORDISH, who then makes way for MARION.*

MARION.

[To ORDISH.] I'll follow in a moment.

[ORDISH goes.

NEALE.

What ho ! below there !

[He also disappears. The church-clock strikes six. LETTY raises her head anxiously.

MARION.

[Approaching her.] Letty.

LETTY.

Well ?

MARION.

Did Pollard write you a prescription ?

LETTY.

It's lying on the bed.

MARION.

Hadn't we better send the girl with it to Wilcox's at once ?

LETTY.

I'll take it myself by-and-by. They're open till ten.

MARION.

On Saturdays are they ?

LETTY.

[Starting up.] Don't fidget me ! oh, don't fidget me !

MARION.

[Soothingly.] No, dear, I'll not. [Fastening a button

of LETTY's bodice.] I have noticed their lights burning late on Saturdays, I remember.

LETTY.

[*Glancing down at her bodice.*] Ah, thanks. I pulled it off and on in such frantic haste.

MARION.

Why, has Dr. Pollard been listening——?

LETTY.

Ha! There, you won't be content till you've wormed it out of me. [*Lightly.*] I have a tired heart, it appears, Polly.

MARION.

A tired heart?

LETTY.

Doesn't it sound romantic? But it's merely a phrase; there's no such thing, actually. I'm anaemic—I've got myself into an anaemic condition. Clever of me! So there's a slight fluttering——

MARION.

I—I see.

LETTY.

Don't stay here; you'll vex Hilda.

[*They walk together to the skylight.*

MARION.

[*Earnestly.*] On Monday you'll begin lunching out with me again, I should hope, in the old way?

LETTY.

[*With a little shrug.*] I—I'm under orders not to go to business on Monday.

MARION.

Whose orders ?

LETTY.

Dr. Pollard's. I ought to loaf—take a long rest, he advises. If I don't, he declines to be answerable—

MARION.

Letty !

LETTY.

[*Shaking her head wilfully.*] La, la, la ! There's nothing to be alarmed about. [Turning away.] Do make them hurry up with that tiresome tea.

[*She stands by the parapet-wall and gazes at the prospect. Her feet tap the leads, and her hands, which are behind her, are seen to clasp and unclasp each other nervously.* MARION follows her.

MARION.

But—but—what will you do ?

LETTY.

Do ?

MARION.

A long rest ! How shall you manage it ?

LETTY.

Yes, I'm stony-broke, aren't I ?

MARION.

We'll study my bank-book to-night.

LETTY.

Your savings ! I'd die first !

MARION.

Sssh ! be sensible.

LETTY.

[Putting her arms round MARION.] I'd die first.

MARION.

Be sensible. The situation has to be faced practically.

LETTY.

[In a whisper.] Polly——!

MARION.

Eh ?

LETTY.

Polly, dear, suppose this holiday—this rest that I am ordered—comes to me, as it were, without any seeking, comes like rain from the clouds !

MARION.

That's all very well. And suppose, on the other hand—suppose it does *not* ?

LETTY.

[Releasing her.] You Job's comforter !

MARION.

It's common prudence to be prepared for disappointment.

LETTY.

[Walking about.] Ha ! You *are* one to give a girl the hump, Polly.

MARION.

All I mean is that in that case you must let me withdraw a little of my vast hoard.

LETTY.

Never; I'm up to my neck as it is. Besides, it wouldn't be of the smallest service to me.

MARION.

Of no service?

LETTY.

No, a poor girl's holiday would be of no use to me now. Yarmouth—Herne Bay—Southend—I've a loathing for the very names of the horrid, vulgar holes! The only rest for me is to be lifted right out of *this*, to be caught up tightly and flown away with —over these house-tops—over there——!

MARION.

Hush, hush! don't be so excited.

[*A voice is heard imitating the sound of a trumpet. The girls separate, and presently NEALE appears bearing a cup of tea and a plate of bread-and-butter. MARION descends.*]

NEALE.

[*Advancing to LETTY with an obeisance.*] Maiden, while the bandits below are sleeping off their drunken stupor, I bring you this bowl of rain-water and this mildewed crust.

LETTY.

[*Recovering herself, laughingly.*] Thanks, friend Carlo. [*Taking the cup-and-saucer and the plate from him and placing them on the parapet-wall.*] The memory of your services will dwell with me until my last hour.

[*He again blows a trumpet-blast and is withdrawing when she calls him.*

LETTY.

Mr. Neale.

NEALE.

Your humble.

LETTY.

Please excuse me for alluding to it, but I hope your disagreement with your firm isn't likely to result in any unpleasantness for you.

NEALE.

[*Sitting on the edge of the skylight, his legs out of sight.*] More likely to result in unpleasantness for Deane and Bosanquet. Where'd they be if Charley Neale turned his back on 'em?

LETTY.

[*Moving towards him.*] At all events, you mustn't think I'm forgetting the—the few pounds you and Mr. Ordish were so friendly as to advance me.

NEALE.

[*Jocularly.*] Well, I'll try my hardest not to.

LETTY.

[*Playing with a finger ring.*] Indeed I—I expect to find myself able—very shortly—very—

NEALE.

[*Looking up at her.*] All right; you take your own time, ducky.

LETTY.

[*Retreating.*] Thank you. It shall be as soon as possible, I assure you.

[*She returns to the parapet-wall and, taking up her tea-cup, becomes oblivious of his existence. He contemplates her for a few moments, then approaches her sheepishly.*]

NEALE.

I say—

LETTY.

[*Curtly.*] What, Mr. Neale?

NEALE.

I say, don't you go working yourself into a state, now, over that messin' little loan, 'cos I won't have it.

LETTY.

[*Relenting.*] You are awfully good. But I'm afraid I sha'n't enjoy much peace of mind until I'm free from —two or three small obligations.

NEALE.

[*Avoiding her eye.*] Letty.

LETTY.

Yes?

NEALE.

[*Kicking one foot against the other.*] Look here, I—I've a—a proposition to make.

LETTY.

Proposition!

NEALE.

I'm agreeable to write that debt off, consider it settled, if you are.

LETTY.

Settled !

NEALE.

Settled. You—you give me a—a kiss for every ten bob you owe me——

LETTY.

Oh ! [Laying her cup aside and backing away from him.] You odious creature !

NEALE.

Stuff! Letty——

LETTY.

Stop calling me by my Christian name, you—worm ! Common I know you are, but I've never suspected you of being quite so low as this !

NEALE.

Great Ned, here's a flare up about a trifle !

LETTY.

[Tragically.] Go !

[He slouches away to the skylight and there halts.

NEALE.

[Mumbling.] 'Pon my soul, one daren't open one's lips to some people. [Turning.] Lett—Miss Shell—[edging nearer to her, expostulatively] you called me Carlo, which is French for Charley——

LETTY.

It isn't French for Charley, and I could cut my tongue out.

NEALE.

And then, recollect, it was a purely business offer.

LETTY.

I desire to be alone, Mr. Neale.

NEALE.

[*After a brief pause, with a humble cough.*] Ahem ! I—I beg your pardon.

LETTY.

[*Shortly.*] Very well.

NEALE.

I—I apologise.

LETTY.

I accept your apology.

NEALE.

Give you my sacred word, it sha'n't ever—ever—
[*rubbing his hand upon his coat.*] My hand's so clammy, or I'd ask you to——

LETTY.

[*Giving him her hand.*] I forgive you, and will forget the occurrence.

NEALE.

[*Wringing her hand.*] A precious poor tea I should have made if we hadn't arrived at an understanding.

[*ORDISH appears, carrying a sausage-roll upon a plate.*]

ORDISH.

[*Advancing.*] Miss Letty, you are to pledge yourself solemnly to eat every morsel of this.

LETTY.

What is it ?

ORDISH.

A sausage-roll.

NEALE.

[*As he departs.*] Miaou ! miaou ! puss, puss, puss !

ORDISH.

[*Turning upon him angrily.*] What perfect taste !

NEALE.

[*In disgust.*] Oh, don't be so affected !

[*He disappears.*

ORDISH.

[*Ruefully.*] We thought it might tempt you, if your appetite is at all squeamish.

LETTY.

[*Taking it from him.*] Hilda couldn't have sent me anything I—[*with a gulp*] I fancy more.

ORDISH.

Come, that's lucky. [*Going.*] She will be glad.

LETTY.

[*Putting the sausage-roll aside, and again taking up her cup-and-saucer.*] Mr. Ordish.

ORDISH.

[*Returning.*] Did you call me ?

LETTY.

[*Sipping her tea.*] You won't think me impertinent, will you? I couldn't help being struck by that remark of yours to Mr. Perry.

ORDISH.

Remark——?

LETTY.

Concerning your—concerning insurance affairs. [*Looking at him askance over her tea-cup.*] This is your bad time of year, perhaps?

ORDISH.

No, this is my good time of year.

LETTY.

[*Sorrowfully.*] Oh!

ORDISH.

[*Thrusting his hands into his pockets and scowling at vacancy.*] But whether the Penguin office is unpopular, or whether it's me——

LETTY.

You?

ORDISH.

My method of canvassing—! [*Harshly.*] Naturally one can't avoid telling people that in the midst of life they are in death.

LETTY.

[*Difidently.*] There's no way of—breaking it to them?

ORDISH.

Heaven knows I've tried every way—gentle—abrupt——

LETTY.

[*Touching his arm.*] The money you were kind enough to lend me—you and Mr. Neale——

ORDISH.

Oh, don't mention my share of it, please.

LETTY.

I had no idea Mr. Neale would consult you in the matter. It was almost a breach of confidence.

ORDISH.

[*Facing her, his manner softening.*] You see he couldn't readily make up the round sum himself on that particular day, and he—[*eyeing her wistfully*] he allowed me to have a bit.

LETTY.

[*Dropping her lids in embarrassment.*] So he explained.

ORDISH.

[*With a slight huskiness.*] He's a capital fellow, old Neale, at heart.

LETTY.

[*Observing the toe of her shoe with great attention.*] You both are. [Quickly, as if fearing a response on his part.] What I wanted to say is that I may—that is, I hope to find myself in a position ere long——

ORDISH.

[*With an elaborate show of indifference.*] Oh, whenever you—whenever you are flush. Not a second before, I insist.

LETTY.

[After an awkward silence.] I am keeping you from your tea.

ORDISH.

I am—from yours.

[They part abruptly, she returning to the parapet-wall, he vanishing rapidly through the skylight. Putting her cup down, she sits in the windsor-chair and gazes after ORDISH with overflowing eyes.

LETTY.

[Compassionately.] Oh ! oh !

[In the distance a street organ breaks into a waltz. Instantly her face brightens and she jumps to her feet.

LETTY.

[With a shake of the body and a little cry of delight.] Ah !

[She selects the smallest piece of bread-and-butter she can find, and, holding it daintily between her finger and thumb, and making a peck at it at intervals, takes a few turns at the waltz. When the bread-and butter is consumed, she seats herself, glowing and breathless, upon the parapet-wall.

LETTY.

Ah ! ah !

[Her eyes fall upon the sausage-roll. She settles the plate upon her lap and, after regarding the roll with aversion, makes several efforts to convey it to her mouth.

Finally, failing in her attempts, she deliberately drops it over the wall.

LETTY.

[*Peering into the depths, gleefully.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha !
 [PERRY appears, carrying a plate of shrimps.

PERRY.

[*As he ascends.*] A'ha !

LETTY.

[*Leaving the wall, guiltily.*] Ah, Mr. Perry ?

PERRY.

I hope I am not too tardy in proffering you these succulent little denizens of the deep ?

LETTY.

Why, they're shrimps.

PERRY.

[*Surprised.*] I said shrimps.

LETTY.

Er—exactly what I fancy. [*Indicating the parapet-wall.*] Put them on my tea-table.

[*He does so, and at the same time remarks the disappearance of the sausage-roll.*

PERRY.

[*Examining the empty plate, then replacing it.*] Not a crumb. This will gratify Miss Gunning.

[*He comes to his camera and prepares to remove it. She is standing at the skylight listening with strained ears.*

LETTY.

Had—had anybody else arrived before you left the tea-table?

PERRY.

No. Is any one expected?

[*She clenches her hands and utters a sigh of suspense. He advances, carrying the camera and stand.*

LETTY.

[*Depressed.*] Mr. Perry.

PERRY.

Eh?

LETTY.

How is *your* business?

PERRY.

My dear young lady, I am gradually being forced to the conclusion that no photographer inspired by artistic ambitions will ever flourish in the Edgware Road.

LETTY.

This is *your* good time of year, too, isn't it?

PERRY.

[*With a shrug.*] One sitting only to-day—a plebeian wedding-party smothered in *confetti*. Six copies.

LETTY.

[*Falteringly.*] I ventured to ask the question because I have been rather fretting about that—that little loan.

PERRY.

[*Grandly.*] Ah, Miss Shell, if it were but in my power to treble, to quadruple, the amount and then to induce you to forget it utterly! [*Regretfully, moving towards the sky-light.*] As it is, alas——!

LETTY.

Let me help you with these.

PERRY.

You are too gracious.

[*He gets partly down the steps and she hands him the camera and stand.*

LETTY.

[*As she does so.*] Mr. Perry, while you are upon the subject—candidly, you know—how long can you—can you——?

PERRY.

[*Taking the camera.*] I am obliged. Wait?

LETTY.

Y—yes—wait.

PERRY.

Candidly? [*Taking the stand.*] I am obliged. [*Cheerfully.*] Till within four-and-twenty hours of quarter-day without the least inconvenience.

LETTY.

Quarter-day! [*Drawing a deep breath.*] That's next week.

PERRY.

[*Simply, as he descends.*] Is it really? Lord bless me, so it is.

LETTY.

Next week——!

[HILDA's voice is heard, then NEVILL's.]

HILDA.

[From below—calling.] Letty! Letty!

NEVILL.

[From below, to PERRY.] I fear you are in a difficulty, sir. May I assist you?

LETTY.

Ah!

PERRY.

[Disappearing.] A thousand thanks. I am obliged.

[She moves away excitedly, endeavouring to command herself. Presently NEVILL appears and, coming to her, takes her hand. He has changed his town attire and is now wearing a suit of serge and a straw hat.]

NEVILL.

Did you think you were not to see me this evening after all?

LETTY.

No—but, as a rule, it's I who keep you waiting.

NEVILL.

I was rash enough to drop in at my club, and there found a couple of invitations for to-morrow which I had to deal with. [Looking about him.] You receive me in the garden.

LETTY.

Hilda's garden. [Leading him to the left.] This is mine, only it's dreadfully pokey.

NEVILL.

It is limited in extent. Still, while you enjoy the run of a neighbour's estate——

LETTY.

[*Leading him to the parapet-wall.*] Look ! isn't it a glorious view ? I am never tired of gazing at it. [Pointing.] There's Regent Circus. [He nods.] Bond Street's there. Ha, ha, ha ! that's where *you* live—I can almost watch you. [With a sweep of the arm.] The Squares—the Park——! What a wonderful light ! The gold-dust has been flying all day.

NEVILL.

The gold-dust ?

LETTY.

The dust rising from the wealth of the millionaires. [He laughs.] The air is choked with it. On a day such as this it melts ; and then, as the sun loses its power, the particles mass together and harden, and the sky becomes a dome of solid gold.

NEVILL.

No wonder the nights are oppressive.

LETTY.

Yes, you can scarcely breathe then, London is shut in so closely. London ! London !

NEVILL.

You little cockney !

LETTY.

Will you have some tea ?

NEVILL.

[*Shaking his head.*] I had a drink at my club.

LETTY.

I've finished my tea. I asked Hilda to give it me in the open, remembering how stupidly I'd behaved in your rooms.

NEVILL.

[*Smiling at her.*] You have contrived admirably.

LETTY.

[*Turning her face away.*] Ha, ha ! Won't you sit down ? [Leading him to the basket-chair.] Here——

NEVILL.

No——

LETTY.

I command !

[*He sits in the basket-chair, she upon the wooden stool which she first places at a short distance from him.*

LETTY.

You may smoke. [*He produces his cigarette case.*] My cigarettes are next door—but I couldn't offer you those.

[*He hands her his case and she accepts a cigarette smilingly. Then he strikes a match and she bends forward and takes a light from it. Having lighted his own cigarette, he sinks back in his chair and lapses into a moody silence. The organ stops playing.*

NEVILL.

[*Frowning.*] Thank God, that noise has ceased !

LETTY.

Oh, I love an organ !

NEVILL.

Enthusiast !

LETTY.

[*Her elbows on her knees, blowing wreaths.*] I've often found myself wishing that the people who wave organ-grinders away could be instantly struck down—die on the spot !

NEVILL.

The porter in Grafton Street has my orders to chivvy the Italian devils directly they show themselves.

LETTY.

[*Slyly.*] Really ! Suppose my wish had ever been gratified——!

NEVILL.

The world would have been no great loser, in my case.

LETTY.

[*Softly.*] You are fishing for a compliment ; I won't pay it.

[*They sit for a time without speaking. The church-bell clangs out the quarter-hour.*

NEVILL.

[*Starting.*] Good Lord ! what's that ?

LETTY.

All Souls'. It sounds so near up here, doesn't it ?

NEVILL.

Ha! yes. [Again there is silence between them.]

LETTY.

[In a low voice.] Are you angry with me for any reason?

NEVILL.

Angry? No, my dear.

LETTY.

[After a further pause, twisting her cigarette between her fingers.] These are delicious.

NEVILL.

Letty—

LETTY.

Yes?

NEVILL.

You know I had a visitor this afternoon—a man—while you were in my den, resting?

LETTY.

Hilda came into the room and said there was somebody with you, and that you'd call us immediately he'd gone.

NEVILL.

It was the gentleman of whom you've spoken to me on several occasions—Mr. Mandeville—Mr. Bernard Mandeville.

LETTY.

How very presuming! What did he want? I beg your pardon—

NEVILL.

Not at all ; you were the sole topic of our conversation. There is a lady in your office, it appears, who busies herself with the private affairs of her fellow-clerks.

LETTY.

Kate Bowman ? Miss Bowman !

NEVILL.

Bowman or Smith or Jenkins—whatever his source of information, Mr. Mandeville has learned that a friendship has recently sprung up between one of his *employés* and myself, and he is greatly disturbed by the circumstance.

LETTY.

One of his *employés*—me ?

NEVILL.

[*Dryly.*] Yes, I don't gather that he has the smallest objection to my acquaintance with the frigid Marion. Certainly, he means you, Letty.

LETTY.

I—I am dreadfully sorry you should be bothered in this manner, Mr. Letchmere.

NEVILL.

Pray don't mind that.

LETTY.

[*Modestly.*] I—I have told you how he has pestered me ever since I first went to Waterloo Place, by talking to me whenever the opportunity occurred—making opportunities to talk to me. But I've not

given him the slightest encouragement. Once he asked me to go out with him—I told you——

NEVILL.

Yes, you told me. [*Shifting in his chair restlessly.*] Well, undoubtedly he has a strong *penchant* for you, my dear child. He's over head and ears in love with you beyond question——

LETTY.

Ah, don't !

NEVILL.

And being possessed of the idea that I am a bar to his progress, he invites me with the utmost cordiality to make room for him—to stand aside. There you have the substance of my interview with Mr. Mandeville in a nutshell.

LETTY.

[*Her bosom heaving.*] I assure you he has never ventured—never dared—to speak a word to me—of love——

NEVILL.

No, I drew that admission from him. His hesitation has been due, however—so he gives me to understand—to the wide gulf existing between his social position and your own. But now——

LETTY.

[*Proudly.*] His position and mine ! True, I am his clerk; but I am also the daughter of a gentleman——!

NEVILL.

Wait. I was about to say that I fancy he is now

determined to battle with his scruples bravely—to fight them like a Trojan. I declined emphatically to —to keep off the grass—the euphemism is Mr. Mandeville's; with the result, if I am any judge of human nature, that you will receive an avowal of his matrimonial aspirations before many days—hours perhaps —are over.

LETTY.

I shall refuse to listen to him! I won't listen to him!

NEVILL.

Won't you? [*Throwing his cigarette away with deliberation.*] Do you think you're wise?

LETTY.

[*Blankly.*] What!

NEVILL.

Dugdale's is a big thing, Letty—I have Mr. Mandeville's authority for the statement. Granted it isn't a trade that everybody would choose to soil his hands with—of how many trades could you not say the same? It's lucrative; and in this huge sweepstakes we call life, for a girl to draw a starter at all is not to be lightly esteemed. Remember the thousands of you that draw blanks—or worse than blanks.

LETTY.

[*With growing apprehension.*] Well, but you wouldn't care to see me—?

NEVILL.

[*Interrupting her.*] And this Mandeville—I suspect his name is Myers or Mendelsohn—he may be an upright, warm-hearted animal on his domestic side.

Most of 'em *are*—more faithful, more devoted to their women-folk, more jealous of family honour, than we—Christians. You must survey your beau from all points of view.

LETTY.

But—but—but you wouldn't care to see me—the wife—of a man like Mr. Mandeville?

NEVILL.

Frankly, the spectacle would be exceedingly disagreeable.

LETTY.

[*Under her breath.*] Ah!

NEVILL.

At the same time I advise you, my dear Letty, not to consult my feelings in the matter.

LETTY.

[*Faintly.*] I—I thought you were—interested in me.

NEVILL.

I am—[*leaning forward*] and in a way I could hardly have imagined possible. So interested in you am I that I find myself—I admit, to my intense surprise—counselling you to balance carefully the claims of this eligible bucket-shop proprietor against the dubious advantages of a continued friendship with an individual who is a bachelor only in his mode of living.

LETTY.

[*Staring at him.*] Why are you married?

NEVILL.

[*Leaning back in his chair.*] Yes, as Mr. Mandeville, who has been examining my credentials, is brutal enough to remind me—yes, I'm married.

[*There is a pause. Her cigarette drops from her fingers and she carefully puts her foot upon it.*]

LETTY.

[*In a low voice.*] You might have mentioned it before. You might have mentioned it.

[*Suddenly she rises and walks to the parapet-wall. There she stands, erect, turning her back upon him. He produces his cigarette-case again.*]

LETTY.

[*After a silence.*] Your wife—Mrs. Letchmere? Does she never go to Grafton Street?

NEVILL.

Ha, ha! no. We separated two years ago—or three, was it?—separated by mutual disagreement.

LETTY.

You—you might have mentioned her.

NEVILL.

She retains the child—[lighting a cigarette] she retains the child, I my liberty. I hope she does better by the one than I with the other.

LETTY.

I hope so.

NEVILL.

Come, come, come! The discovery that you've

allowed a married man to sit with you in Kensington Gardens upon a few fine summer evenings; that you have once or twice permitted him to thread with you the sinuous but decidedly-public paths of the exhibition-grounds at Earl's Court!—is it such a very terrible humiliation?

LETTY.

Perhaps you are no judge of how a girl may be humiliated. [Clenching her hands.] Oh, why didn't you mention it?

NEVILL.

At first I saw no necessity for babbling of myself. We had not reached that footing.

LETTY.

[Partly turning to him.] Afterwards, when I grew less reserved with *you*—when you let *me* talk——?

NEVILL.

[Deep in his chair, watching the smoke from his cigarette.] Afterwards? Ah, our relations had then become so pleasant that I was reluctant to disturb them. I knew they couldn't last—nothing lasts! I knew that this disclosure—would make a difference.

LETTY.

[Her eyes flashing.] Difference!

NEVILL.

And I own I wanted to delay it. With due respect—curse Mr. Mandeville! Why couldn't he have afforded us a further respite? My dear child, your confiding prattle, your refreshing zest of life, have drugged me into some delicious intervals of oblivion,

illusion. Beware of sentimentalists! Under the influence of your companionship, my dear, I have found myself back in the days when one sang as one tramped between budding hedge-rows, when the down was first sprouting on one's lip and the world was still Arcadia. That's it, Letty! we've strayed into Arcadia together—a cockney Arcadia beneath the trees of Kensington Gardens or among the band-stands at Earl's Court! And there you've seen the best of me. That is my apology—hitherto at least, I have been at pains to show you the best of me. For longer, I swear, than any woman who has ever attracted me, you have seen what is best in me.

LETTY.

[*Advancing a step or two, eyeing him half-curiously, half-fearfully.*] I have been mistaken in you altogether, then?

NEVILL.

[*Rising.*] I have explained—you have seen only the best of me.

LETTY.

[*Struggling to keep back her tears.*] Was it part of your best to—to kiss me this afternoon? [*Wiping the kiss from her lips.*] You needn't have done that. It was a shame of you to do that.

NEVILL.

[*With a deprecating shrug.*] Recollect I had just gone through the ordeal of prodding Mr. Mandeville on to a proposal of marriage.

LETTY.

[*Confronting him, hotly.*] You might have spared

yourself the trouble. Your anxiety that I should marry this person is extraordinary! You—you insult me!

NEVILL.

[*Quietly.*] Ah, there you are unfair, my little friend.

LETTY.

Unfair!

NEVILL.

[*With some impatience.*] Good heaven, Letty! do me the justice to perceive that I am urging you to secure yourself against the snares that beset a girl placed as you are—a girl of your temperament particularly!

LETTY.

[*Scornfully.*] A moral lecture!

NEVILL.

I am conscious of the incongruity, but repeat the admonition. Open your eyes, you simpleton!

LETTY.

Oh, believe me I am fully capable of protecting myself without marrying Mr. Mandeville, or any man. [*Stepping back, with a glance at the skylight, as a hint for him to leave her.*] However, this is a theme I prefer not to discuss with you, Mr. Letchmere.

[*He bows slightly and passes her; then he turns and holds out his hand.*

LETTY.

[*Giving him her hand.*] Good-bye. I can't help being indignant, but I—I thank you for the treats you have given me.

NEVILL.

[*Retaining her hand and speaking in precise, measured tones.*] Pray bear in mind that I hope this fellow Mandeville will come up to the scratch and that you'll hook him. [*She withdraws her hand angrily.*] But should he not do so, or should you wilfully neglect your opportunity—well——!

LETTY.

[*Surprised at the change in his voice and manner.*] Well?

[*He walks away from her to the parapet-wall. When there he invites her by a look to join him. She goes to him wonderingly.*

NEVILL.

[*Pointing into the distance.*] “Bond Street's there”; that's where *I* live. [Softly.] You will be welcome, my dear.

[*She stares at him for a moment; then comprehending, her breath comes shortly and sharply, and she hurriedly unfastens the brooch at her throat.*

LETTY.

Oh! oh! I forgot this thing——!

[*She is about to fling it at his feet when he stays her hand gently.*

NEVILL.

No, no, no; don't do that. In memory of Arcadia!

[*She falters and stands, with quivering lips, helplessly rolling the brooch up in her handkerchief. At length she breaks down and*

sinks on to the chair by the parapet wall, crying bitterly.

NEVILL.

[After regarding her silently for a while—roughly.] Letty, whatever happens, I wish to God I'd never met you.

[He leaves her abruptly, goes to the skylight, and descends. As he disappears, MANDEVILLE is seen climbing through the dormer window.

MANDEVILLE.

[On the roof of LETTY's house.] Phst ! Phst ! [She raises her head and listens. He advances to the dwarf wall on the left.] Any one hear ? [She rises, drying her eyes hastily. He discovers her.] Hullo ! Haw ! Letty !

LETTY.

Mr. Mandeville !

MANDEVILLE.

Dessay you're astonished to see me ?

LETTY.

V—very.

MANDEVILLE.

I found your address at the office. I want two minutes' talk with you. Your landlady sent me up. [Getting over the wall.] Capital ideah this, on a summer evening. [Glancing at his lemon-coloured gloves.] Plenty of sut, though.

LETTY.

[On the right, distantly.] Mrs. Hill ought to have announced you. This is the house of a friend of

mine. She has a tea-party, and I am just going to join it.

MANDEVILLE.

No necessity for hurry, is there? [*Staring at her.*] Aint you well?

LETTY.

Perfectly.

MANDEVILLE.

You've been lookin' rawther peaky lately. [*At her side.*] I know what would do *you* good—lolling about the gawden of my little place——

LETTY.

[*Drawing back.*] Thank you, I——

MANDEVILLE.

Swinging in one of my hammocks——

LETTY.

I don't go out a great deal.

MANDEVILLE.

Haw! don't you? That doesn't quite square with the reports that reach me.

LETTY.

[*Pulling herself together.*] Indeed!

MANDEVILLE.

You're seen out pretty frequently with your—haw! —with a gentleman of the name of Mr. Nevill Letchmere.

LETTY.

By Miss Bowman, I presume?

MANDEVILLE.

Haw ! Anyhow, such proceedings are—haw!—highly reprehensible—highly objectionable to the firm.

LETTY.

I am not aware that Mr. Letchmere interferes with the proper discharge of my duties. [Making a movement.] I am afraid I must——

MANDEVILLE.

[Standing before her.] Deuce take it, you can give me two minutes, surely ! Letty, I've always regawded you as one of the proud, stand-off sort ; heaps of go in you but no confounded nonsense—see what I mean ? You're not the young woman I should have expected to find gallivanting all over the shop with a feller who has a wife kicking about somewhere or other ; a feller——!

LETTY.

Mr. Letchmere is a—a man of honour ; and I have the deepest respect for him, as he has for me.

MANDEVILLE.

[Checking an oath.] Respect be— ! Haw ! You're not *au fait* with his pedigree, that's evident. He springs from a scoundrelly stock, and what's bred in the bone——

LETTY.

I've no wish to hear——

MANDEVILLE.

His fawther went off with a Miss Cleary the day before she was to be married to Sir George Peele.

LETTY.

It's possible.

MANDEVILLE.

And his beautiful ma played the leadin' part in the Shafto scandal. You've never read an account of the Shafto——?

LETTY.

No, I have not.

MANDEVILLE.

Both his brothers have been through the Divorce Court.

LETTY.

Their acts are not my Mr. Letchmere's.

MANDEVILLE.

Your Mr. Letchmere's! Haw! Oh, I can furnish you with a jolly thick catalogue of *his* doings. I've mastered *his* little history from A to Z.

LETTY.

My friends are waiting for me, Mr. Mandeville.

MANDEVILLE.

Two minutes! Two minutes; 'pon my soul I won't keep you beyond it. Can't we—haw!—bring ourselves to an anchor!

[*After some hesitation, she seats herself upon the edge of the basket-chair.*

LETTY.

[*Tapping her foot upon the ground.*] Two minutes.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Sitting beside her, upon the wooden stool.*] I—haw!

—I've come straight heah from the Acacia Road—my residence—Regent's Pawk. I—haw!—I've been chatting matters over with my mothaw.

LETTY.

Matters—with your mother——?

MANDEVILLE.

My old mothaw lives with me; superintends the house, the slaveys and so forth—see what I mean? Letty, I—haw!—I've been gently rubbing you into her.

LETTY.

What!

MANDEVILLE.

Of course I don't desiah to upset the old lady. She's a splendid old gal; sixty odd—beautiful white hair—head's a picture. [*Pulling at his moustache.*] But—haw!—she's enormously stout and one mustn't upset her.

LETTY.

Why—why should you upset her?

MANDEVILLE.

Well, luckily, there's no occasion to, because, as it happens, she's as reasonable as they make 'em. She was disposed to be glum at first; *that* you cawn't be surprised at—see what I mean?

LETTY.

N—no.

MANDEVILLE.

She didn't cotton to the notion of your being a product of the office. But I soon managed to smooth her

down—gave her a flowery description of you—see what I mean?—and the upshot of it is she's nuts on my carting you up to her to-morrow morning.

LETTY.

Mr. Mandeville——

MANDEVILLE.

[*Bending towards her.*] Letty, I've been sweet on you ever since Cohen called me into his room and asked me to run my eye over you. "Well?" said Mike, when you'd cleared out. "By Jove, she's fetching!" I said. "Fetching be blowed!" said the old man, "is she worth her screw?" Worth your screw! [*Edging nearer.*] Pet——!

LETTY.

[*Shrinking into her chair.*] No, no!

MANDEVILLE.

Eh?

LETTY.

I—I couldn't; I couldn't.

MANDEVILLE.

Couldn't?

LETTY.

No.

MANDEVILLE.

The sentiment aint reciprocated, is that it?

LETTY.

Yes.

MANDEVILLE.

Oh, that'll work right. *You shake off the feeling*

that I'm "the guv'nor"—learn to consider yourself my equal ; that's what you've got to do. To *you*, I dessay, up to now, I've been simply the guv'nor lowering himself by a passing flirtation with one of his gals.

LETTY.

[*With a curl of the lip.*] You have, simply.

MANDEVILLE.

Perhaps it *was* like that at the beginning. And perhaps that freezing style of yours, whenever I've tried to make myself agreeable, has done the trick. At any rate, you can begin to forget that part of the business from this moment. Letty, *you're* boss now. [Advancing his face to hers.] Give us a kiss——

[*She struggles to her feet; he rises with her.*

MANDEVILLE.

[*Ruffled.*] Oh, there's nothing to be frightened at.

LETTY.

I—I am extremely sorry, Mr. Mandeville—extremely——

MANDEVILLE.

Sorry?

LETTY.

And I—I hope you will excuse me for not speaking the truth to you a minute ago.

MANDEVILLE.

Truth——?

LETTY.

When you were kind enough to inquire whether I am quite fit. The fact is, I am under imperative

orders—doctor's orders—to take a long spell of rest, a holiday at the sea-side, without delay. So I—I must beg you, and the other members of the firm, to dispense with my services in Waterloo Place.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Blankly.*] Ho! [*After a pause.*] Am I to understand, then, that you don't propose to show at the office again?

LETTY.

I think you will agree with me that it's better I shouldn't.

MANDEVILLE.

Haw! Very good. Chucking yourself out, and at this season of the year! Pretty prospect! And what fashionable sea-side resort may you be patronising?

LETTY.

I—I haven't decided.

MANDEVILLE.

Saved money? [*She is silent.*] Saved money?

LETTY.

N—not much.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Watching her keenly.*] No relations, have you? [*She shakes her head.*] Intend running into debt, I s'pose? [*Her hands move uneasily.*] Debt!

LETTY.

Oh, don't——!

MANDEVILLE.

Haw! Once you find yourself *there*, you know——!

LETTY.

I know—thanks——

MANDEVILLE.

[*Suddenly.*] You're not looking to Letchmere, are you——?

LETTY.

I!

MANDEVILLE.

To help you over the stile ?

LETTY.

Mr. Mandeville !

MANDEVILLE.

Look to me ! Look to me, Letty. [*Clasping her waist.*] Heah ! listen ! [*She slips away from him and passes him, but he regains his hold of her.*] Don't be a fool ! Look to me. I'll spoil you ; I'll make a perfect doll of you. Holiday ! You shall go with the old lady for her annual to Trooveal. Trooveal ! That's the spot if you're off colour. I'll fix it. You start rigging yourself out. *I* pay—see what I mean ?—I pay. They *dress*, at Trooveal ; but you shall knock lumps off 'em.

LETTY.

[*Feebly endeavouring, at intervals, to free herself from his embrace.*] Please ! please !

MANDEVILLE.

Don't be a silly fool ! And later on, when we—when we're Mr. and Mrs. ! Cawn't you fancy yourself driving down to the office of an afternoon, picking me up and giving me an airing in your own Victoria ? How's that for a triumph ! Your own carriage !

LETTY.

[*Hysterically.*] Hush ! oh ! oh !

MANDEVILLE.

I'll spoil you, I tell you !

LETTY.

I—I—

MANDEVILLE.

I'll make a doll of you !

LETTY.

I—I'll think it over. I'll write.

MANDEVILLE.

When ?

LETTY.

To-morrow.

MANDEVILLE.

No ; let me call in the morning. I'll call in the morning.

LETTY.

Leave me now, then.

MANDEVILLE.

Eleven o'clock suit you ?

LETTY.

[*Weakly.*] Oh——

[*He releases her and she walks, rather unsteadily, to the skylight. There, with her back to him and her hand to her brow, she stops irresolutely. The church-bells strike the half-hour.*

MANDEVILLE.

[*Settling his neck-tie.*] Haw ! I'll be heah shawp.

[*She turns and sinks down upon the slope on the left, sitting upon the pillow and staring before her.*]

MANDEVILLE.

[*Approaching her, shooting his cuffs preparatory to departure—awkwardly.*] So-long, my dawling. You be off to your tea-fight.

[*He passes behind her, going to the wall on the left.*]

LETTY.

[*As he does so—dully.*] Can you find your way ?

MANDEVILLE.

Yaas. [*Offering his hand.*] Au revoir.

LETTY.

[*Raising her head and speaking in a quiet, tired voice.*] Mr. Mandeville.

MANDEVILLE.

Hey ?

LETTY.

I—I am in debt, already.

MANDEVILLE.

What amount ?

LETTY.

Over twenty pounds. And I—I'm out of health—and haven't a farthing.

MANDEVILLE.

[Seating himself upon the wall eagerly.] You give me a schedule in the morning—list of your liabilities. Sec what I mean ?

LETTY.

[With a nod, her eyes filling.] Yes. Yes. [Brushing the tears away and shifting her position slightly.] Trouville—Trouville's awfully pleasant, isn't it ?

MANDEVILLE.

Pleasant ! One perpetual whirl. Pleasant !

LETTY.

[With a little sob.] I—I've heard of it. [A pause.] I—I believe you'd be good to me.

[He rises with alacrity, upon which she scrambles up and retreats to the right. He follows her and seizes her by the shoulders.

LETTY.

[Breathlessly.] My friends—my two or three chums—you won't ask me to drop them ? I wouldn't !

MANDEVILLE.

Are they any class ?

LETTY.

[With clenched fists.] I don't care a rap. It's a condition !

MANDEVILLE.

Oh, you keep 'em ; you'll speedily get sick of 'em. [Drawing her to him.] I'll spoil you——

LETTY.

Ah, no, I'm not a kissing girl.

MANDEVILLE.

Haw! Rot! One—

[*She shuts her eyes and he kisses her. Her manner changes; she becomes gay again, in a forced, defiant way, almost boisterous.*]

MANDEVILLE.

Haw! Anothaw—

LETTY.

No, no; your mother hasn't approved of me yet.

MANDEVILLE.

Haw, haw! *She'll approve.*

[*She runs to the parapet-wall and stretches out her arms to the prospect.*]

LETTY.

Ah . . . ah . . . !

MANDEVILLE.

[*Joining her.*] Eh? What are you doing?

LETTY.

Ha, ha, ha! I am to drive in my carriage, after all—drive in it down Bond Street! Ho! Well—!

MANDEVILLE.

Down Bond Street? [*Suspiciously.*] Bond Street?

LETTY.

Come! I'll introduce you to my friends—shall I?

MANDEVILLE.

[*His brow clearing.*] You're in no great haste to get rid of me, then ?

LETTY.

[*Moving to the skylight.*] Not if you wish to remain.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Following her.*] Letty—Letty, what are you up to to-night ?

LETTY.

[*Descending.*] Nothing ; I've no engagement.

MANDEVILLE.

Haw ! Are you game for an out ?

LETTY.

Game ! Ha, ha ! [*Giving him her hand.*] Be careful——!

[*The curtain falls.*

END OF THE SECOND ACT.

THE THIRD ACT

The scene is a “cabinet particulier” in a fashionable restaurant in London. There are two doors—one on the left, in the back wall; the other in the wall on the right. The doors open into the room—the left-hand door from a passage, that on the right-hand from a landing. On the left of the room is a sideboard, at the back a settee, and in the centre are a round table and three chairs. On the right, nearer the spectator, stand a sofa without a back, a smaller table and a chair. There are other chairs placed about the room, against the walls.

The decorations of the apartment are florid in design and gaudy in colour. Mirrors are let into the panels of the walls on the right and left, and from the frames of the mirrors spring clusters of gilt hooks for the disposal of hats and coats.

On the round table there is evidence of a dinner that has reached its final stage—empty coffee-cups and glasses, a box of cigars, a decanter of wine, and two bottles of liqueur. On the smaller table is an evening paper.

The room is gaily illuminated by electric light.

[*FLORENCE CROSBIE is seated—facing the spectator—at the round table, with COPPINGER*

LETTY

DRAKE on her right and NEVILL on her left. She and DRAKE are staring dejectedly at the table-cloth; NEVILL, resignedly bored, is leaning back in his chair studying the ceiling. The trio are smoking. After a while FLORENCE drops her cigarette into her empty coffee-cup and raises her head.

FLORENCE.

[Heavily.] Getting late, isn't it ?

DRAKE.

[A fresh-complexioned, boyish young man, rousing himself.] Oh, do forgive me, Mrs. Crosbie. I've been an absolute owl all the evening—too stupidly dull for words.

NEVILL.

[Consulting his watch.] A quarter to eleven.

DRAKE.

Must we——?

[Receiving no response, he rises reluctantly and rings the bell.

NEVILL.

At what hour do you start, my dear Coppy ?

DRAKE.

[Returning to his chair.] I've only to go round to my rooms and change. [Sitting.] I expect Jenny is shuddering outside my front door already.

NEVILL.

Jenny ?

DRAKE.

That's Tiny's—that's Mrs. Crosbie's nickname for the automobile. [Looking at FLORENCE.] Spanking Jenny—what!

FLORENCE.

[In a melancholy voice.] Spanking Jenny. An ideal night for a rush through the air.

NEVILL.

Where do you sleep?

DRAKE.

Sleep! Oh, I haven't thought. I shall find myself somewhere or other to-morrow.

NEVILL.

Well! May your tyres never grow less, my dear fellow! You have given us an admirable dinner.

DRAKE

[Simply.] Glad. Has it been admirable? I'm afraid I've not been noticing. [There is a knock at the door at the back.] Entrez. [A waiter appears.] My bill. *L'addition*, you know.

WAITER.

Yes, sir. [Taking up the box of cigars.] 'Ow many, sir?

DRAKE.

[Wearily.] As many as you please.

[The man removes the bottles of liqueur and the cigars from the table and goes out. As he withdraws, a knock is heard at the door on the right.

DRAKE.

Oh, come in—I mean *entrez*.

[FRÉDÉRIC—*a good-looking maître d'hôtel—bows himself in. He carries a pretty bonbonnière.*

FRÉDÉRIC.

[*Speaking with a slight foreign accent.*] Good evening, madam; good evening, gentlemen.

NEVILL.

Hullo, Frédéric! how are you?

FRÉDÉRIC.

[*Approaching the table.*] Very well, sir; I hope you are the same.

NEVILL.

Capital, thanks.

FRÉDÉRIC.

[*Addressing NEVILL.*] I apologise for troubling you, but a gentleman—a regular customer of ours—has rung us up to say that he is bringing on a party of friends from the theatre, for supper. He orders a private room, and unfortunately all our other private apartments are engaged.

NEVILL.

Making your fortune, Frédéric?

FRÉDÉRIC.

[*With a shrug.*] Our premises are too small. Ah, if they would allow us to take in the little chapel at the back there! The number of places of worship in London!

DRAKE

That's all right ; we shall be going in a few minutes.

FRÉDÉRIC.

I am extremely obliged. The gentleman is such a first-class customer, or I should not have made so free.

NEVILL.

Don't mention it.

FRÉDÉRIC.

Everything has been quite satisfactory ?

NEVILL.

Excellent—but I am a guest of Mr. Drake.

FRÉDÉRIC.

Ah, pardon !

DRAKE.

[*Indifferently.*] Oh, yes, quite—quite.

NEVILL.

The *Filet Piqué Richelieu* was perfection, Frédéric.

FRÉDÉRIC.

Thank you, Mr. Letchmere. [*Going to FLORENCE and presenting her with the bonbonnière.*] With Madame Vigeau's respects.

FLORENCE.

Madame——?

NEVILL.

Vigeau—the amiable proprietress.

FLORENCE.

Exceedingly gracious of her. [To FRÉDÉRIC.] *Veuillez faire à madame mes vifs remercements.*

FRÉDÉRIC.

[With more bows.] Good-night, madam. [Backing to the door at which he entered.] Good-night, gentlemen. [He disappears, closing the door.

FLORENCE.

[Untying the ribbons of the box.] *Chocolat Marquis.*

NEVILL.

For the encouragement of Madame Vigeau's patrons.

FLORENCE.

[To NEVILL.] And patronesses. You are a first-class customer here also, I guess. [He laughs.] Are they invariably presented with chocolate? [Slipping a tablette into her mouth.] Well, it's a compliment, at my age.

[Still laughing, he rises and picks up the evening paper.: She offers the box to DRAKE who dips his hand into it sadly.

NEVILL.

[Running his eye over the paper.] Is your carriage here, Tiny?

FLORENCE.

No, Ivor raves so abominably when I keep it hanging about. And I'm not going home yet awhile.

NEVILL.

[Elevating his brows.] Not?

FLORENCE.

Helen Urquhart is in town this week-end, and she has scratched up a few stray people to play Bridge at her place to-night. I had a note from her while I was dressing, asking me to come on.

NEVILL.

Your looks suggest by-by as a wiser course—if I may indulge in the personality.

FLORENCE.

Thanks, very much; but I want to tire myself to death before I make that experiment. [Rising and joining him.] You'll chaperon me?

NEVILL.

My dear girl, what a bore!

DRAKE.

[Who has also risen—in answer to another knock at the door at the back.] Eh?

[The waiter returns, with the bill. DRAKE goes to him and throws a bank-note on to the plate. The waiter withdraws, whereupon DRAKE, seeing that NEVILL and FLORENCE are talking together, seats himself on the settee at the back and leans his head upon his hands miserably.

FLORENCE.

[To NEVILL.] Do be good-natured. Besides, you can't help yourself.

NEVILL.

[Glancing at DRAKE and dropping his voice.] No. I

undertook to stick to you to-night and to escort you home, didn't I ?

FLORENCE.

[*In similar tones.*] And Ivor knows it. So I am entitled to be on the loose, you see.

NEVILL.

Oh, Ivor knows it, does he ?

FLORENCE.

[*With a nod and a grimace.*] We had a devil of a scene before I left the house. I had to take my oath you'd promised not to stir from my side.

NEVILL.

You've got me on toast, then. [*Shaking his head at her good-humouredly.*] You troublesome little urchin, I wish you had never been born.

FLORENCE.

[*Suddenly, in tears.*] Oh ! oh ! so do I ! so do I !

NEVILL.

[*Calming her.*] Hush, hush ! Tiny—— !

[*She recovers herself quickly, and, having dried her eyes, adjusts her hair-combs at one of the mirrors on the left.* DRAKE, looking up, hurries to her and assists her in the putting-on of her cloak, which is hanging upon a hook attached to the mirror.

FLORENCE.

Thanks.

[*They go through the comedy of a friendly leave-*

taking, their eyes more eloquent than their words. NEVILL discreetly withdraws to the further side of the sofa on the right and sits there, deep in his paper, with his back to them.

FLORENCE.

[*Turning to Drake.*] Well, Coppy, I—I hope you'll have a tolerable time up north. [*Drawing on her gloves.*] The best of sport to you and—and all that sort of thing !

DRAKE.

I wish you a pleasant time, too, Mrs. Crosbie. You're off to Marienbad next month ?

FLORENCE.

On the seventeenth.

DRAKE.

If I've moderate luck, I may knock up against you in the late autumn.

FLORENCE.

[*Quickly.*] No, I intend to keep out of England till the Spring, and let the hunting go to blazes for once. After Marienbad I—[*in another tone.*] Look here, Coppy ! as we sha'n't meet for—for an age, there's something I'd like to say to you.

DRAKE.

Er—charmed.

FLORENCE.

[*Drawing a chair away from the round table and seating herself.*] I—I take an interest in you boys—love to see you going steady and straight, and making

careers for yourselves. Do you know what would give me the keenest delight?

DRAKE.

What?

FLORENCE.

Hearing of your becoming engaged to some nice, clean, well set-up girl; hearing of your being—spliced. You're seven-and-twenty, and—my frankness doesn't annoy you?

DRAKE.

Not in the least. But I—I'm not a marrying man, Mrs. Crosbie.

FLORENCE.

Ho! fiddle!

DRAKE.

[*Crumpling the tablecloth.*] Life has treated me a bit roughly and I—oh, I feel beastly stale, played-out. I pity the girl who'd have to pass her days in my society.

FLORENCE.

[*Pulling at her gloves.*] You've evidently got the blues for the moment, from some cause or another; the Highland air will soon blow *them* away. And you're bound to find yourself with a crowd of pretty girls at Aberfeldy or at Lochbarne—the Grahames always have their house chock-full of 'em. So, recollect, I shall watch the papers for an announcement—

DRAKE.

[*Bending over her, after a glance in the direction of NEVILL.*] You'll see nothing; nothing of that kind concerning me.

FLORENCE.

[Pushing him from her.] Ha, ha ha ! I shall continue watching, though. [Looking at him with gleaming eyes.] At any rate, I—I give you this piece of advice, Copy.

DRAKE.

Yes ?

FLORENCE.

Don't get in the way of forming great friendships with married women. Only those women who are discontented with their lot, or who are utterly worthless, are ready to form such friendships. Neither class will do you any good ; and if there's a decent woman amongst them—you may make her the more wretched. [Passionately.] Leave them alone ! keep off them !

[There is a knock at the door at the back. She rises and grips the lapels of his coat.

FLORENCE.

[Her face close to his, almost inaudibly.] Good-bye. [Aloud.] Come ! [Passing DRAKE and going to NEVILL.] Ready, Nevill ?

[The waiter returns with DRAKE'S change. He is accompanied by another waiter who proceeds to clear and to re-lay the round table. Having tipped the first waiter, DRAKE puts on his overcoat, which is hanging at the back of the room on the left.

NEVILL.

[While this is going on—to FLORENCE, quietly.] Brava ! Spoken like a mother !

FLORENCE.

[*In a low voice.*] Sweet of you to bury your head in that paper. [*Her mouth askew.*] Bar rot, what d'ye think of me ?

NEVILL.

Proud of you, Tiny. Yes, you're the best of us, far and away. [*Looking at her, half-pityingly.*] I believe you were made for a nursery full of little ones.

FLORENCE.

[*Wincing and leaving him.*] Tsch !

[*The second waiter hands her the box of chocolate and she joins DRAKE at the back.*
NEVILL walks across to the left, where his hat and coat are hanging.

NEVILL.

[*To the second waiter, who hurries to him.*] No, I'll carry it. [*Tipping the man.*] Good-night.

SECOND WAITER.

[*Returning to the round table.*] Good-night, sir.

FIRST WAITER.

[*At the door on the right.*] Good-night, gentlemen. Good-night, lady.

[*The waiter opens the door upon FRÉDÉRIC, who re-enters. Behind him is seen a party of men and women.*

FRÉDÉRIC.

[*To DRAKE and FLORENCE.*] Ah, I am sorry——

DRAKE.

No importance. Good-night. [Giving his arm to FLORENCE and leading her through the advancing troop —speaking to those outside.] Allow me——

NEALE.

[Without.] Ho, beg pardon! Pip-pip!

[MANDEVILLE and LETTY appear, followed by HILDA and NEALE, MARION, ORDISH, and PERRY. With one exception, the new comers are appropriately dressed—LETTY prettily and gracefully, HILDA resplendently, MARION with characteristic neatness. The exception is ORDISH, who is wholly in black, of a kind, and who wears a white tie, but whose frock-coat is still in evidence. MANDEVILLE's manner is aggressively self-assertive and patronising; HILDA and the three male guests display the eagerness of people intent upon making the most of a rare occasion; while LETTY has abandoned herself to a condition of excitability and feverish gaiety in which there is an air of desperation. MARION alone preserves a calm demeanour. NEVILL, seeing LETTY and MANDEVILLE, draws back into the room, and, with an ugly look upon his face, deliberately awaits the encounter.

LETTY.

[As she enters—over her shoulder.] Is everybody here? Where's Mr. Perry? I don't see Mr. Perry.

PERRY.

[*In the distance.*] Just arrived. Mr. Ordish and I walked.

HILDA.

[*Counting.*] One—two—three—four—five——

MANDEVILLE.

[*To FRÉDÉRIC.*] We're seven. Haw! Where's the menu?

FRÉDÉRIC.

Immediately, Mr. Mandeville.

[*FRÉDÉRIC goes out at the back.*

LETTY.

Our cab-horse nearly went down outside the Criterion. If Bernard hadn't caught hold of my arm——

MANDEVILLE.

[*Taking off his overcoat.*] Waitah! waitah! [*Coming face to face with NEVILL.*] Hullo! Oh! [*Loweringly.*] Good-evening.

NEVILL.

[*On the left suavely.*] How are you, Mr. Mandeville? Pleased to meet you again. [*Bowing formally to LETTY, who stands transfixed.*] How do you do?

[*A waiter relieves MANDEVILLE of his hat and overcoat.*

HILDA.

[*From the further side of the table.*] Why, it's—! Oh——!

NEVILL.

Ah, Miss Gunning!

HILDA.

[*Coldly.*] Oh, good evening.

NEVILL.

[*To MARION, who is with HILDA.*] How are you, Marion?

[*Considerable bustle now takes place at the back. With the aid of their men-friends, HILDA and MARION divest themselves of their overthings—the former very fussily, and the waiters more to and fro disposing of these articles and of the men's hats and coats. Ultimately HILDA—for whom NEVILL's presence is full of interest—seats herself, with MARION, on the settee at the back and watches the proceedings.*

NEVILL.

[*During the movement, to MANDEVILLE.*] Don't think me quite a trespasser; I happen to have been dining here. [*Flatteringly.*] No need to tell *you*, my dear Mr. Mandeville, where to find the best *bourgeois* cooking in London. You are a most valued patron of this establishment, I learn.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Ill at ease.*] Haw! dessay they've seen a little of my money in their time.

NEVILL.

You have come on from the theatre?

MANDEVILLE.

[*Shooting his cuffs.*] Alhambra—couple of private

boxes and a suppah to wind up with—some friends of Miss Shell's. One likes to give pleashah to people occasionally. Haw ! Letty——

LETTY.

[*On the right, struggling to collect herself.*] Yes ?

MANDEVILLE.

[*To NEVILL.*] I—haw !—take this opportunity of informing you—haw !—[with a wave of the hand towards LETTY] my fiancée.

NEVILL.

[*After a brief pause, quietly.*] My dear Mr. Mandeville, pray allow me to offer my hearty congratulations.

MANDEVILLE.

Much obliged, I'm shaw.

NEVILL.

[*Looking steadily at LETTY.*] Not only to yourself——

[*MANDEVILLE, giving his moustache a twist, makes way for NEVILL.*

NEVILL.

[*Advancing to LETTY.*] But to this young lady, [extending his hand] whose married life will, I trust, be one of undisturbed felicity.

LETTY.

[*Tossing her head defiantly.*] Bernard and I will have our fair share of bliss, I expect. [*Giving him the tips of her fingers and withdrawing them promptly.*]

We mean to try for it at all events—[to MANDEVILLE, archly] don't we?

MANDEVILLE.

Haw ! yaas.

NEVILL.

[*Standing between them.*] I shall make a point of drinking to your happiness in due season. When is the event to take place? If I am in England, I shall certainly——

MANDEVILLE.

[*Mollified by NEVILL's manner.*] Haw! why not stay and have a drop of champagne with us heah? [LETTY barely represses a gesture of protest.] I'll give you a glass of '92 Moët. You'll appreciate it; [*contemptuously*] it's wasted on these fellers—might as well pour it down a drain.

NEVILL.

[*Glancing at LETTY.*] It is excessively kind of you, Mr. Mandeville——

MANDEVILLE.

Oh, I'm one for letting bygones be bygones, where gentlemen are concerned. That's my system—Berny Mandeville's system. We've had our jangle, and no harm done—[*shaking hands with NEVILL*] my paw. What d'ye say?

NEVILL.

[*After a moment's hesitation.*] Delighted.

[*LETTY turns away, to the right, and tugs agitatedly at the fastening of her cape, FRÉDÉRIC reappears, with the menu.*

MANDEVILLE.

[*Facing those at the back, loudly.*] Haw ! Mr. Perry—Mr. Neale—Mr.—what's-yer-name—my friend, Mr. Nevill Letchmere. Gentleman's going to join us.

NEALE, ORDISH, and PERRY.

[*To NEVILL.*] Good evening, sir.

MANDEVILLE.

[*On the left, snatching the carte from FRÉDÉRIC.*] Look alive ! We shall be eight—round numbers—

[*FRÉDÉRIC represents to MANDEVILLE the difficulty of seating the guests.*

PERRY.

[*Bustling up to NEVILL.*] Proud to come across you again, sir. If I mistake not, you're the gentleman who was so courteous as to lend me a hand with my camera.

NEVILL.

[*Looking for an opportunity of joining LETTY.*] Ah, yes.

PERRY.

An encounter of a second ; but the eye of the genuine artist in photography is as sensitive, sir—as sensitive—

MANDEVILLE.

[*Calling to PERRY.*] Hi ! you !

PERRY.

Me——?

[*He goes to MANDEVILLE. At the same moment, DRAKE is seen at the door on the right.*

Catching NEVILL's eye, DRAKE beckons to him. Meanwhile LETTY hangs up her cape by the mirror on the right and proceeds to tidy her hair.

MANDEVILLE.

[*To PERRY.*] A couple of you will have to sit at that side table.

PERRY.

I entertain no objection.

MANDEVILLE.

Cawn't help it, if you do. It's got to be—see what I mean?

PERRY.

To me, one seat is equal to another; although, naturally—

MANDEVILLE.

I'm busy; you run along and play.

[*MANDEVILLE seats himself astride a chair and discusses the bill of fare with FRÉDÉRIC. PERRY returns to his companions.*

NEVILL.

[*At the door on the right—to DRAKE, continuing a conversation.*] My dear fellow, it would be uncommonly friendly of you if you *would*. The Urquaharts are in Green Street—not much out of your way.

DRAKE.

Yes, I'll drop Mrs. Crosbie there, with pleasure.

NEVILL.

I'll be with her in half-an-hour—less.—

DRAKE.

I'll explain.

[*He withdraws. NEVILL closes the door and comes to LETTY.*

NEVILL.

[*To LETTY.*] An odd chance.

LETTY.

[*With an attempt at lightness.*] Very.

[*She sits upon the sofa, removing her gloves. He gets rid of his hat and overcoat and stands beside her, looking down upon her. Through their talk, which is carried on in subdued tones, comes the murmur of MANDEVILLE's voice and of the conversation of those at the further end of the room.*

NEVILL.

[*Bitingly.*] My forecast of events has been speedily justified.

LETTY.

Ha! hasn't it!

NEVILL.

Yes, my gentleman didn't take long——

LETTY.

He—he called this evening, directly you had gone.

NEVILL.

And found a ready listener.

LETTY.

Why do you adopt that tone? You advised me to do a thing; I did it.

NEVILL.

The result is none the more palatable, my dear—now that I come to view it closely. I am like a child, eh? I bestow a gift, and cry for it back again.

LETTY.

I—I was never yours to bestow.

NEVILL.

No? At any rate, the idea of you in that animal's sty——!

LETTY.

For shame! how dare you!

MANDEVILLE.

[*Loudly, to Frédéric who is making notes.*] Oh, strike out the *hors d'œuvre*, if you want to. Knock it out——

NEVILL.

How much have you told him?

LETTY.

About yourself?

NEVILL.

Yes.

MANDEVILLE.

[*As before.*] Begin with the consomay——

LETTY.

Not a word against you. I wouldn't, in spite of

all. He believes you have been an ordinary, good friend to me, and that I've known you to be a married man throughout.

NEVILL.

I marvelled at his amiability !

LETTY.

Of course, the girls know otherwise ; I couldn't blind them. But they'll keep it to themselves.

NEVILL.

[*Sneeringly.*] I may hope, then, for a place in your circle after your marriage.

LETTY.

No, no, no ! You mustn't ever—you sha'n't— ! Oh, if you've a spark of feeling in you—— !

[MANDEVILLE's voice rises angrily. NEVILL strolls round to the other side of the sofa.]

MANDEVILLE.

[To FRÉDÉRIC.] That be blowed for a tale ! If I ordah *Sole Dieppoise*, I'm bound to have it—see what I mean ?

FRÉDÉRIC.

[Referring to his watch.] It cannot be done under fifteen minutes.

MANDEVILLE.

Tell the *chef* to hurry up—and no kitchen-maids on the job ! *Sole Dieppoise* ! [To those at the back.] Haw ! you've never had such a feed as I'm giving you to-night, I'll go bail.

[There is a polite chorus of acknowledgment

from the men. FRÉDÉRIC mutters an order to one of the waiters, who goes out hurriedly, and resumes receiving instructions from MANDEVILLE.

NEVILL.

[At LETTY's side again.] May I compliment you on the frock you are wearing? You were to dine with me one night next week, weren't you? A *tête-à-tête* dinner—our first—

LETTY.

Tuesday night.

NEVILL.

[Smiling grimly.] This is the dainty little garment that was being prepared for me, I fancy? Our festivity had been delayed for it.

LETTY.

[Fingering her sleeve.] It was all I had to put on this evening. I'd nothing else. [Starting to her feet.] I had to be smart.

NEVILL.

[Covering her with his eyes, his tone softening.] Letty, why couldn't we have steered clear of each other for a while! Why couldn't we!

LETTY.

[Piteously.] Yes, and yet you jumped at his invitation!

NEVILL.

I was an ass. Still, I wished to hear from your own lips—to be absolutely certain—[between his teeth] A jealous ass!

LETTY.

Get away soon, then, now that you've satisfied yourself. Do!

NEVILL.

[With a nod.] As soon as I have drunk a glass of wine. [A note of tenderness in his voice.] Good luck to you!

LETTY.

[Gratefully.] Ah——!

[Perceiving that MANDEVILLE is rising, she goes to him swiftly.

MANDEVILLE.

[As he rises, to FRÉDÉRIC.] No magnums of the '92! Put half-a-dozen bottles on the ice, to start with.

[FRÉDÉRIC, having given some further directions, withdraws. The waiters, who have been busily coming and going, now finish the laying of the round table, which is prepared for six persons, and afterwards lay the smaller table for two.

LETTY.

[To MANDEVILLE, slipping her arm through his.] What a supper you are ordering! I've been listening.

MANDEVILLE.

Preeious sight too good for this crowd.

LETTY.

They'll hear——!

MANDEVILLE.

Rump-steak and onions more their form.

LETTY.

No, no; you can't guess how they'll enjoy it.

[NEVILL has again picked up the evening paper, which he has left upon the sofa.]

MANDEVILLE.

[Leaving LETTY and advancing to him.] Late edition?

NEVILL.

[Hanging him the paper.] Yes.

MANDEVILLE.

[Seating himself upon the sofa and becoming absorbed in the financial column.] Haw! thanks.

NEVILL.

Vanderleyden's death will cause quite a panic in the American market?

MANDEVILLE.

[Not looking up.] Maybe.

[NEVILL turns on his heel and joins the ladies at the back. LETTY is now with MARION and HILDA, laughing and talking with forced animation.]

LETTY.

[Loudly.] Ha, ha, ha, ha!

[PERRY, seeing that MANDEVILLE is alone, detaches himself from the others and comes to him softly.]

PERRY.

[Behind his hand.] Ahem!

MANDEVILLE.

[*Raising his eyes momentarily.*] Hey?

PERRY.

I—ahem!—I have been wondering during the evening, Mr. Mandeville, whether, upon the occasion of your wedding, you will observe the pretty custom of—ah—standing for your portrait?

MANDEVILLE.

To you?

PERRY.

[*Assentingly.*] With your bride's arm in yours. Or she upon a chair, you bending over her in an attitude of affection——

MANDEVILLE.

[*Turning the paper.*] Hope it hasn't spoilt your evening.

PERRY.

Oh, no; far from it. [*Extracting a card from a pocket-book.*] As a study of still life, we also obtain charming results from the cake.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Curly.*] Do yer?

PERRY.

[*Presenting his card.*] My private abode is in Langham Street; this is my studio.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Glancing at the card.*] Edgware Road!

PERRY.

The merit of the artist is the main consideration.

MANDEVILLE.

Dessay.

PERRY.

I may remark, however, that I am not without the prospect of being able shortly to shift my basis of operations to a more fashionable quarter. An uncle of mine, a large draper in the Holloway district, has the strongest belief in me—

[NEALE now approaches, attempting to intrude himself between MANDEVILLE and PERRY.]

PERRY.

[To NEALE.] One moment, Mr. Neale; Mr. Mandeville and I are talking business.

NEALE.

Ho!

[NEALE moves away and presently reappears at the other side of the sofa.]

PERRY.

[To MANDEVILLE, mysteriously.] I suppose, sir, in the event of the formation of a syndicate, you wouldn't care to come in?

MANDEVILLE.

Well, yer see—

PERRY.

[Eagerly.] Yes?

MANDEVILLE.

Yer see, I'm still fairly young and energetic—

PERRY.

Ah, indeed.

MANDEVILLE.

And I don't think it 'ud amuse me to make a big fortune as rapidly as all that.

PERRY.

[*Stiffly.*] I am obliged.

[PERRY rejoins the others. MANDEVILLE crumples PERRY's card and throws it under the sofa.]

NEALE.

[To MANDEVILLE.] Rather rummy taste, seems to me—bothering you with his rubbishing concerns.

MANDEVILLE.

Gentleman's got a good thing on. Pity you're not a capitalist.

NEALE.

Talking of a good thing, I expect you'll be smartening-up at home before long?

MANDEVILLE.

What are yer driving at—smartening-up?

NEALE.

Making your drawin'-room a bit gayer; furnishing and decorating a boudwar for the wife, perhaps. [Searching his pockets for a card.] If so, you might give a thought to your humble.

MANDEVILLE.

What's *your* line?

NEALE.

Carpets and linoleum, strictly speaking. But I can get you thirty per cent. off any blessed article you choose to name, from an Old Master to a sanitary dust-bin.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Indifferently.*] Haw ! if you've a cawd on you——

NEALE.

Because a party of your description is rolling in it, he doesn't want to chuck it about, does he? Oh, here—[*finding a card in a bundle of dirty letters and handing it to MANDEVILLE, who pockets it.*] Why, even if you wanted to hang a few pearls round her swan-like, I could introduce you to a Johnny——

[*He breaks off upon seeing ORDISH, who presents himself, with a nervous, diffident air, on MANDEVILLE's right.*

NEALE.

[*To MANDEVILLE.*] Those performing dogs fairly hit me. Thought I should have bust.

[*He moves away, whistling.*

ORDISH.

[*To MANDEVILLE.*] Yes, they were amazingly entertaining, those animals. I don't know when I've spent a more exhilarating evening.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Resuming his reading.*] Haw !

ORDISH.

And now, this sumptuous repast. Every luxury which fastidiousness can dictate and liberality supply. A grand culmination.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Sarcastically.*] 'Taint a bad finish.

ORDISH.

But there is one danger we must always guard against, sir.

MANDEVILLE.

Danger—what danger ?

ORDISH.

We must never allow transient delights of this nature to blind us to our solemn responsibilities.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Looking up.*] What the—— !

ORDISH.

[*Searching for a card among the miscellaneous contents of his pockets.*] Take the question of insurance, for instance—a most vital matter to a person on the eve of marriage. [MANDEVILLE lays the paper aside angrily.] It is with no wish to dampen your spirits, sir, that I remind you that in the midst of life——

MANDEVILLE.

[*Rising.*] Well, I'm—— !

ORDISH.

[*Offering his card.*] I shall be happy at any time to

discuss with you the manifold advantages of a terminable endowment policy——

FIRST WAITER.

[*Appearing before MANDEVILLE.*] Supper is ready, sir.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Loudly.*] Suppah ! suppah !

ORDISH.

With a quinquennial division of profits——

MANDEVILLE.

Oh, hang !

[*He passes ORDISH and advances to the circular table, at which the waiters have now arranged the chairs. MANDEVILLE'S guests—with the exception of NEVILL, who holds aloof, and PERRY, who stands by the smaller table—gather round, waiting to be placed.*

MANDEVILLE.

[*Taking a chair and pointing to the seat on his right.*] Haw ! Letty, you sit heah. Sit down, all of yer. [To MARION, indicating the chair on his left.] Heah ! you come heah.

[*Everybody sits, save NEVILL and PERRY. A collision between HILDA and ORDISH amuses LETTY and she shrieks with laughter.*

MANDEVILLE.

Who sits at the side-table ? Hullo, Letchmere ! forgot you. Pawdon. Heah ! somebody make room for Mr. Letchmere.

ORDISH.

[*Rising.*] I'll oblige the gentleman.

NEALE.

[*Who is seated on LETTY's right, rising.*] I'm willing.

LETTY.

[*Detaining NEALE with a quick movement.*] No, no ; not you ! I—I want Mr. Neale on my other side.

NEVILL.

[*To MANDEVILLE.*] Pray let nobody be incommoded. I've only just dined, remember. A glass of wine to drink your health—[*going to the sofa*] this will do admirably.

MANDEVILLE.

You must have a gal, then, to keep you company.
[*To HILDA.*] Haw ! Miss Gunning—

[*HILDA, her mouth full, and carrying her broken roll of bread and her serviette, transfers herself to the chair by the small table.* NEVILL sits, facing her, upon the sofa, while PERRY takes his seat at the round table. All, except NEVILL, fall to upon the soup.]

MANDEVILLE.

Waitah, champagne !

FIRST WAITER.

Yes, sir.

MANDEVILLE.

[*To those at the round table.*] You don't get soup of this sort every day of the week.

ORDISH.

True.

NEALE.

Hear, hear !

MARION.

It's delicious. I'm really hungry.

PERRY.

It's so clear. Its clearness astonishes me.

MANDEVILLE.

Of course it's clear; it's consomay. [*Offensively.*] Don't know what consomay is, perhaps ?

LETTY.

[*Under her breath.*] Hush ! oh, hush !

MANDEVILLE.

[*Turning to her in surprise.*] Eh ?

LETTY.

[*Checking herself.*] Ha ! . . . [gaily] Change loaves with me ; yours is more attractive than mine.

NEALE.

They strain it ; that's what they do—they strain it.

ORDISH.

I should doubt that. If I were asked——

NEALE.

I tell you they strain it, Jimmy; through a cloth, or through long, white, conical bags—[*twisting his*

table-napkin into the form of a sugar-loaf] this shape——

LETTY.

Similar to the hats the musical clowns were wearing to night. Ha, ha !

NEALE.

Great Ned, how screaming they were, those clowns !

LETTY.

Weren't they !

NEALE.

[*Putting the napkin on his head.*] When the long chap fell on the little 'un—— !

LETTY.

Yes, the funny little one !

MANDEVILLE.

Haw ! you haven't sat in a private-box very often, any of you, I'll bet a guinea.

ORDISH.

I've not, lately.

MANDEVILLE.

Haw, haw ! lately ! Why cawn't you say you *never* have, like a man ?

LETTY.

[*Touching his sleeve.*] Ah, don't !

MANDEVILLE.

What's wrong ?

LETTY.

Oh—those clowns ! Ha, ha ha ! Polly, you thought them amusing ?

MARIION.

Amazingly.

LETTY.

Ha, ha, ha, ha !

PERRY.

My mother was a great maker of soup.

NEALE.

Good old home-made soup !

PERRY.

I beg your pardon, Mr. Neale——

MANDEVILLE.

Right ! An English cook's soup aint worth eating—filth ! That's why I come heah—though my own cook's one of the best in London. I've spent hundreds of pounds heah.

PERRY.

It was pea-soup my mother excelled at.

MANDEVILLE.

Hundreds and hundreds of pounds.

NEALE.

Pea-soup ! Ho, ho !

PERRY.

My mother has been dead-and-gone some years, Mr. Neale, and I'll take it as a personal favour—oh, it doesn't signify.

ORDISH.

Quite a young woman, too, I'll be bound.

PERRY.

Thirty-three. Pastry also ! She had the lightest hand in the world for pastry.

ORDISH.

Thirty-three. Now, if she had insured her life when she was one-and-twenty, say for a thousand—lend me a pencil——

MANDEVILLE.

Waitah !

ORDISH.

On our new endowment principle, with a quinquennial division of profits——

MANDEVILLE.

Waitah, where's that champagne ?

[The glasses are filled, the soup-bowls removed, and the fish served. The conversation at the round table is now carried on in dumb-show.]

HILDA.

[To NEVILL, between the courses, her hauteur gradually melting.] You'll excuse my not being chatty ?

NEVILL.

[Who has been watching LETTY thoughtfully from under his brows.] Certainly.

HILDA.

At these fashionable restrooms it doesn't do to get behind ; they whip your plate away before you know where you are. *[Dropping her voice and leaning for-*

ward, her elbows on the table.] I say, I wasn't aware that you and—[with a motion of the head towards MANDEVILLE] are acquainted. What a magnificent match for her !

NEVILL.

[Moving nearer to her, speaking in undertones.]
Most advantageous.

HILDA.

He does scatter it, too.

NEVILL.

There is every evidence of it.

HILDA.

We might have been princesses, at the Alhambra. Each lady had her own programme, and sweets during the selections by the band. Lavish, I call it.

NEVILL.

Lavish is the exact word.

[There is a boisterous laugh from LETTY.

HILDA.

[To NEVILL.] Ah, I do pat myself on the back over this. I've prophesied it from the very beginning.

NEVILL.

Indeed ?

HILDA.

Yes, I only wish I had as many sovereigns as times I've called her, in chaff, Mrs. M——, Mrs. Bernard M. [Drinking her wine.] That's why it drove me wild to see her making herself such a fearful juggins. [Smacking her lips.] Champagne's my wine.

NEVILL.

Such a——?

HILDA.

Juggins. Wasting her evenings on you! You don't object to my candour?

NEVILL.

I admire it. A fine quality.

HILDA.

I'm nothing if not candid. [*With pride.*] I've lost some of my best friends through it.

NEVILL.

I've no doubt.

HILDA.

[*Severely.*] Upon my word, I wonder I talk to you at all. Oh, you ought to blush for yourself, really you ought.

NEVILL.

[*Laughingly.*] My dear Hilda!

HILDA.

Never to have told her you're a married man! Double-face! But I guessed it.

NEVILL.

Did you?

HILDA.

Did I! I wish I had as many sovereigns as times I've said to her, "Letty, I'm sure that chap's tied-up with some other female——"

[A waiter now offers her the dish of sole. She helps herself.

HILDA.

Sole——?

WAITER.

Sole Dieppoise.

HILDA.

What's all this—mussels?

WAITER.

Yes, lady.

HILDA.

I'm the last, aren't I? [To NEVILL.] You're not——?

NEVILL.

No.

[She empties the dish and the waiter moves away.

HILDA.

[Eating, to NEVILL.] You'll excuse my leaving off talking?

NEVILL.

I mourn the loss but recognise the necessity.

HILDA.

[Glancing up at him sternly.] Don't you give me any of your nonsense, please.

[The conversation at the round table is resumed, aloud.

PERRY.

A rather novel dish, if I may be permitted the observation.

MANDEVILLE.

Sole Dieppoise—sole with mussels. Great delicacy prepared this way.

NEALE.

Decidedly tasty, must admit.

PERRY.

Mussels? [*Innocently.*] Dear me, what a prejudice there is against mussels!

MANDEVILLE.

Prejudice, is there!

PERRY.

Enormous. Many people won't look at a mussel.

MANDEVILLE.

Ho, won't they!

PERRY..

Nervous people. And, of course, they have *this* to go upon—

MANDEVILLE.

What?

PERRY.

One is continually hearing of indisposition—serious indisposition—as an after effect— .

MANDEVILLE.

Look heah, Mister Perry—!

PERRY.

Eh?

MANDEVILLE.

If you disapprove of the food that's given you, I tell you what you can do—

LETTY.

Bernard !

PERRY.

Oh, if I've said anything to offend, I'm sorry.

LETTY.

No, no, there's no offence, not the least—[to MANDEVILLE] is there ?

MANDEVILLE.

Ho, no, not the slightest !

NEALE.

It is a fact, though. Friend o' mine had a cousin who died of 'em.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Throwing his knife and fork down and leaning back in his chair.*] Phugh !

LETTY.

[*Hysterically, laying a restraining hand on MANDEVILLE.*] Hush-sh-sh ! ha, ha, ha ! We don't intend to die of them, do we ? [Edging closer to him and looking into his face.] Do we ? do we ?

MANDEVILLE.

[*In a growl, to her.*] Letty—— !

LETTY.

[*Enticingly.*] Ha, ha ! Ha, ha, ha !

MANDEVILLE.

[*Softening.*] Haw ! [Pinching her chin.] Haw, haw !

ORDISH.

According to the insurance tables, poisoning from mussels is very prevalent among the humbler classes.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Explosively.*] Humbler classes ! yes !

LETTY.

Ha, ha !

[*She feeds him with a mussel at the end of her fork.*

ORDISH.

A case came up before our board not long ago. The assured had paid only two premiums, so we lost heavily. One of my introductions ; my usual fortune.

NEALE.

Ho, ho !

[*MANDEVILLE, a mussel on his fork, repays LETTY's attention.*

LETTY.

[*To MANDEVILLE.*] Ha, ha, ha ! You silly—— !

ORDISH.

However, doesn't that go to prove my argument ? I'm always repeating it I'm sick of repeating it.

PERRY.

What argument?

MANDEVILLE.

[*Shouting to NEVILL.*] Hullo, Letchmere ! how are you getting along ?

ORDISH.

Why, that in the midst of life—in the very midst of life—

NEVILL.

[*Who, with a scowl, has again been watching LETTY and MANDEVILLE.*] Your judgment is a sound one about this '92 Moët, Mr. Mandeville.

MANDEVILLE.

Haw ! A glass of all-right and a handsome gal opposite yer ! Haw, haw, haw ! [To LETTY.] Look at 'em ! look at 'em !

[LETTY turns in her chair to view the pair.

LETTY.

[*Wildly.*] Well, Hilda ! Isn't this—isn't this jolly ? Eh ? Ha, ha, ha— !

[*Her eyes meet NEVILL'S and her laugh comes to a full stop. She gives him an appealing look and her head droops over the back of her chair.*

NEVILL.

[*Quietly, taking up his glass.*] I am afraid I have to be running away, Mr. Mandeville. Would it be a serious interruption to your hospitality if we seized this moment to drink a toast ? [Rising.] To our host, Mr. Bernard Mandeville, and to one who is the friend

and companion of many who are present—Miss Shell
—Miss Letty Shell——!

[*The guests jump up, their glasses in their hands.*

ORDISH.

To be sure !

PERRY.

A—ah—happy inspiration.

NEALE.

Hurrah !

MARION.

Letty—Mr. Mandeville !

HILDA.

Bless them both ! [*To LETTY.*] You old darling !

NEVILL.

Miss Shell—Mr. Mandeville !

[*The toast is drunk.*

NEALE.

Hip, hip——!

HILDA.

Here ! I say ! [*Wiping her lips with her table-napkin.*] I propose that Mr. Mandeville leads off by giving her a good kiss, and that we all follow suit—chaps and all— ! [*To MANDEVILLE, as the men at the round table wipe their mouths.*] Do you mind ?

MANDEVILLE.

[*Putting his arm round LETTY's waist and drawing her to him.*] Haw ! I don't mind—— !

LETTY.

Oh——!

[With a cry, she frees herself from him and struggles to her feet. As she does so, the lights in the room are extinguished.]

MANDEVILLE.

Hullo! what's this? [There is a general exclamation of surprise.] What the devil—? Heah!

[The lights are raised, but only to go up and down at short, regular intervals. Those who have been standing now resume their seats, with the exception of NEVILL, who moves away to fetch his hat and overcoat.]

MANDEVILLE.

Waitah! waitah!

FIRST WAITER.

[Coming to his side.] Yes, sir; yes, sir.

MANDEVILLE.

Yes, sir; yes, sir! Stop this! look at it! stop it!

FIRST WAITER.

We cannot 'elp it, sir. We are compelled. It is time.

MANDEVILLE.

Time! We're not half through!

FIRST WAITER.

[Stolidly.] It is very unfortunate.

MANDEVILLE.

Rats ! Curse your unfortunate ! Don't stand there jabbering like an ape !

[FRÉDÉRIC, evidently ruffled, enters at the back.

The waiters proceed to remove the plates and to lay others. The lights now remain steady for a time.

MANDEVILLE.

[To FRÉDÉRIC.] Heah ! you ! Mister Frederick !

FRÉDÉRIC.

[Coming to him.] I am extremely sorry, Mr. Mandeville——

MANDEVILLE.

Sorry ! I tell yer we're not half through.

FRÉDÉRIC.

[With a shrug.] I asked you to order a simple supper, and you would not. Oh, no, you would not !

[Looking at his watch.] I said I would do my best ; I have done my best.

MANDEVILLE.

Best ! Call this yer best ! That's cutting it a bit thick, aint it ?

FRÉDÉRIC.

It is Saturday night. I cannot prevent twelve o'clock from 'appening.

MANDEVILLE.

Twelve o'clock ! Oh, this cursed country !

FRÉDÉRIC.

[*With growing excitement.*] I have nothing to do with the management of the country. I have been scolded by my own manager, finely scolded, and that is enough.

MANDEVILLE.

[*Hitting the table.*] Of all the cursed countries——!

FRÉDÉRIC.

The country is not my fault. What I say is——

MANDEVILLE.

[*Rising.*] Now, you listen to me——!

FRÉDÉRIC.

What I say is, Mr. Mandeville, that we find it impossible to serve the *poussins*—impossible. If the ladies and gentlemen will be satisfied with some cold meat——

MANDEVILLE.

Cold meat!

FRÉDÉRIC.

Some galantine, perhaps——

LETTY.

Yes, yes. That will do admirably—[*to the others*]
won't it? [There is a chorus of assent.]

MANDEVILLE.

[*To those at the round table.*] You hold your tongues!

FRÉDÉRIC.

And coffee to follow quickly——

[*The lights resume their flickering.*

MANDEVILLE.

[*Furiously.*] Who is it that's playing with this cursed light?

FRÉDÉRIC.

The manager—Mr. Nerval——

MANDEVILLE.

The blighter!

[*Swearing under his breath, he makes for the door at the back. ORDISH, NEALE, and PERRY rise, and intercept him.*

ORDISH, NEALE, and PERRY.

Mr. Mandeville—sir—cold meat—excellent——!

MANDEVILLE.

[*Pushing them aside.*] Get out, you——!

[*He disappears.*

FRÉDÉRIC.

[*To the waiters.*] Inutile d'aller plus loin. Il n'entend ni à dia ni à hurhau.

[*A shout is heard, followed by the noise of a scuffle; and at the same moment the lights in both the room and the passage are switched off, causing total darkness. Then comes another cry, accompanied by the falling of some heavy object. The women shriek and clutch at one another. PERRY, ORDISH,*

*and NEALE gather together at the back,
near the door.*

FRÉDÉRIC.

Ah——!

[*He and the waiters find their way out of the room. NEALE produces a match-box and strikes a light.*

NEALE.

[*In a whisper.*] Great Ned !

PERRY.

What has occurred ?

ORDISH.

Something.

NEALE.

In the midst o' life, cockey—— !

[*The confused sound of many voices, gradually increasing in volume, now comes from the passage.*

HILDA.

Hark !

MARION.

O, dear !

NEALE.

Tell you what it is, sweet pals——

PERRY.

Hush !

NEALE.

If we're not careful, we shall find ourselves in
quod.

ORDISH.

Quick ! let's hear ! [The lights are switched on.]

PERRY, NEALE, and ORDISH.

Ah !

ORDISH.

Charley—Mr. Perry——

NEALE and PERRY.

Eh ?

ORDISH.

Oughtn't we to go and see——?

NEALE.

You may.

PERRY.

No harm in looking on.

[The first waiter enters quickly and seizes a carafe of water and a napkin.]

PERRY, NEALE, and ORDISH.

What is it ! What's up ? Who is it ?

WAITER.

Mr. Nerval——

[He hurries away. The hubbub without continues unceasingly. Timidly, the three men go into the passage where, with expressions of dismay upon their faces, they are witnesses of what is taking place in the distance. NEVILL joins them, his overcoat upon his arm, calmly putting on a glove.]

HILDA.

A pretty end to it all, I declare! Serves me right for waltzing out with any Tom, Dick, or Harry!

MARION.

[*Pointing to LETTY, who has dropped into a chair and is sitting, dazed, with parted lips and wide-open eyes.*] Sssh!

HILDA.

Next time I make myself cheap——!

MARION.

Do be silent!

HILDA.

Oh, silence yourself! A perfect brute—a raging, wild animal!

MARION.

How can you?

HILDA.

What's the Zoo doing? Married or not, the other dear boy's worth a million of him. Give me Letchmere!

NEALE.

[*Looking into the room.*] Phst! one of you girls——!

MARION.

What——?

NEALE.

[*Beckoning.*] You're wanted.

[*MARION joins him and presently disappears.*

HILDA follows her; whereupon ORDISH, NEALE, and PERRY, gaining courage, also

pass out of sight. The hubbub goes on in a continuous murmur. NEVILL slowly approaches LETTY.

NEVILL.

[*By her side.*] Don't be alarmed; old Nerval is more scared than hurt. A lump has been raised on that shiny, bald head of his. These affairs are invariably adjusted amicably. [Gently.] Poor little woman!

[*She makes no response. He touches her.*

LETTY.

[*Raising her eyes for an instant.*] You going?

[*He shrugs his shoulders. She rises, her ears strained to catch the distant clamour.*

NEVILL.

[*After a pause.*] This won't do. You couldn't bear this.

[*Moistening her lips with her tongue, she also shrugs her shoulders.*

NEVILL.

[*Eagerly.*] You couldn't—could you?

LETTY.

I—I wish you hadn't seen it.

NEVILL.

Letty——

LETTY.

Oh, I wish you hadn't seen it.

NEVILL.

Letty—don't go back.

LETTY.

Not go—eh——?

NEVILL.

Don't *try* to go back to it all. It's of no use struggling. Come to *me*.

LETTY.

[*In a stifled voice.*] What——!

NEVILL.

Damn *him*! you won't take him on after this? You'll have him about you to-morrow, you know, half sulky, half penitent. Will you kiss and be friends? [*She shivers.*] Come to *me*. [*In her ear.*] You see, it is the inevitable, my dear. Come! [*She shakes her head, her eyes full of fright.*] Let us talk things over, at least. Let's talk things over. Letty——

LETTY.

W—when?

NEVILL.

To-night. [*A pause.*] You will?

[*She stands quite still. Laying his hat and coat aside, he produces a card-case, withdraws a card from it, and writes on the card with a pencil*

NEVILL.

[*As he scribbles.*] Be careful not to raise this cur's suspicions. When he has left you at your door, jump into a cab and come down town again. I have to go on to Green Street. It's a nuisance ; but I'll be home as soon as possible. You understand ? [She nods.] If you arrive before I do, show this to the hall-porter and he'll get my servant up. [Handing her the card.] No need to be frightened ; you'll be treated with every respect. Where are you going to put it ?

LETTY.

[*Slipping the card into her bodice with trembling fingers.*] Here.

NEVILL.

You won't sell me—not sell me ? Don't sell me !

LETTY.

N—no.

NEVILL.

[*In another tone, as he takes up his hat and overcoat.*] Make my apologies to—[glancing towards the passage] will you ?

LETTY.

Yes.

[*He smiles upon her and, turning away, goes out with quick strides at the door on the right. For a moment or two she doesn't stir ; then she creeps to the door at the back and peers into the passage. The tumult increases, comes nearer, and she slowly backs away from it.*

MANDEVILLE.

[*His voice rising above the uproar.*] Haw ! I give ten sovereigns to the French Hospital—ten golden sovereigns—see what I mean ?—

[*The curtain falls.*]

END OF THE THIRD ACT.

THE FOURTH ACT

The scene is that of the first act.

The disposition of the furniture on the left is altered. The settee has been moved to the right of the table and stands out almost to the middle of the room, and between the table and the spectator is a solitary chair set to face the windows. The rest of the chairs have been restored to places against the walls. Upon the table is a large silver tray upon which are decanters of spirits, glasses, siphons and bottles of aerated waters, etc., etc.

The doors are closed and the room is in darkness.

[*A sharp pattering of rain is heard upon the window-panes. After a little while it ceases; and then the door on the left is opened by RUGG who enters and switches on the light. LETTY, MARION, and HILDA—dressed as in the previous act—are seen to be waiting in the corridor, which is already lighted. RUGG has the appearance of a man disturbed in his preparations for retiring to rest.*

RUGG.

[*By the door.*] This way, please.

[*LETTY advances to the back of the settee on the left and stands there with a look partly of abasement, partly of sullenness. The others follow. MARION retreats to the end of the room and takes up a position near the writing-table: HILDA crosses to the settee on the right where she proceeds to dab her cloak and skirt with her handkerchief.*

RUGG.

[*Referring to the card bearing NEVILL's message, which he has in hand—to LETTY.*] Er—these young ladies are with you, I presume, miss?

LETTY.

[*In a low voice.*] Yes.

RUGG.

[*To HILDA.*] Can I be of any assistance, miss?

HILDA.

Thanks; don't you bother. What a shower!

RUGG.

Yes, miss; this ought to cool the air. [*Regarding LETTY inquisitively.*] Won't you take a seat, miss? [*Avoiding his gaze, she seats herself upon the settee on the left.*] I beg you ladies will excuse my attire. Fact is, it's not my habit to remain up for Mr. Letchmere unless specially asked.

[*Obtaining no further response, the man bestows a final look upon the girls and withdraws softly.*

HILDA.

[*After a glance at the door—still occupied in removing the rain-spots.*] Why we must all tumble out of the cab in Bond Street, and sneak round here as though we're burglars, is beyond me. I'm for dashing up to a house. Great Scot, my shoes !

LETTY.

[*Her eyes fixed upon the carpet.*] Mr. Letchmere is not in yet. What do you intend to do ?

MARION.

[*Who, upon the withdrawal of Rugg, approaches Letty.*] Wait—if you decide to wait.

LETTY.

He—he'll consider it a great liberty.

MARION.

Because you show him you've too much respect for yourself to come here alone !

LETTY.

[*Without lifting her eyes or raising her voice.*] Well, I—I consider it a liberty. I resent it. Following me in this fashion—jumping into my cab uninvited —keeping close beside me ! as if I were a child, or not responsible for my actions ! I resent it.

HILDA.

I didn't get into your hansom till I saw Marion there. One couldn't help feeling curious——

LETTY.

Oh, you know I'm not alluding to you, Hilda.

MARION.

[*Bitterly.*] Ha! No, Hilda isn't the encumbrance. But then, she's a weathercock—ready to turn at the slightest puff.

HILDA.

[*Taking off her hat and shaking it.*] I advise you to be careful of your expressions, Miss Allardyce.

MARION.

[*Bending over LETTY.*] Letty—Letty, I've no desire to intrude. I'm not enamoured of these rooms, I assure you. I'm sorry I forced my company on you. Letty, promise me that Hilda remains with you and brings you home, and I'll take myself off instantly.

LETTY.

Thank you, I—I prefer to make no promises.

MARION.

Oh, don't be wilful! Letty, it's Sunday.

LETTY.

I'm not fatigued. And I don't go to the office on Monday—to face that beast; I can keep late hours now.

MARION.

[*Persistently.*] That's not the point; the point is your being here. [To HILDA who, seated upon the settee on the right, is flicking the trimmings of her hat.]

Hilda, do back me up! It's nearly one o'clock in the morning. Hilda!

HILDA.

[*With her drawl.*] What's the matter with one o'clock in the morning?

MARION.

Eh?

HILDA.

She's told you Letchmere wants a quiet little talk with her. When a gentleman's behaved rather deceitfully to a young person and is eager to get on good terms with her again——

MARION.

[*Scornfully.*] Good terms!

HILDA.

The sooner he's given the opportunity the better.

MARION.

Why he should be given it at all passes my comprehension.

HILDA.

Why! [*In an outburst.*] Oh, what's needed in this business is a bit of plain, unadulterated common-sense——!

MARION.

I agree.

HILDA.

And considerably less Young Women's Christian Association. I'm for downright common sense, I am.

MARION.

And I.

HILDA.

Are you ! It isn't common sense, then, to expect a girl who's in love with a chap like Letchmere to drop him, to order, at short notice.

MARION.

Not when she discovers the kind of "chap" he is !

HILDA.

There you go ! One would imagine the world's nothing but Sunday-school, to hear you. *My* world isn't, at all events. [Loftily.] I don't belong to that *mongde*.

MARION.

In any "*monde*"—in any walk of life, a woman's duty to herself under such circumstances is pretty obvious, I should have thought.

HILDA.

Ah, *you'd* have thought.

MARION.

To hold her head erect; raise it proudly; take a clear view of things !

HILDA.

A clear view—exactly. Only, as my aunt used to remark, there's more than one view from the top of a tower. [Rising, as she puts on her hat and secures it with a pin.] Of course, it's a thousand pities the dear boy turns out not to be single; but there it is. What

can't be cured—an' *cetera*. [*Surveying herself in the mirror which stands on the piano.*] Scissors ! the mere idea of that low bully of a Mandeville, after Letchmere ! I could have sworn *he* wouldn't answer, directly she presented him as her affianced.

MARION.

You could have sworn it, could you !

HILDA.

[*Taking up her gloves, which she has laid aside on entering, and walking about the room while she draws them on.*] Oh, I hid my true sentiments. I have my share of tact, I flatter myself. As Ma Watkins is continually drumming into us : "cut is all very fine ; material's all very fine ; but when everything's said and done, it's tact that sells the gown."

MARION.

[*To HILDA, but watching LETTY keenly.*] Well ! it may be my denseness, but you've not quite succeeded in convincing me that a continued acquaintance with Mr. Letchmere is indispensable to Letty.

HILDA.

Oh, I can't supply brains——

MARION.

Granted he's made her fond of him—the scamp ! —a few weeks' change of scene will serve to set that right.

HILDA.

A pokey bed-sitting-room at the sea-side ; photos of the landlady's husband and brats on the mantel-shelf ! Yes, that'll help, won't it !

MARION.

And then, when we find her a comfortable, new berth ; when she resumes her employment, occupies her mind—

HILDA.

[*Pausing in her walk.*] Work !

MARION.

Work.

HILDA.

Ha !

MARION.

Yes, work. [*Hotly.*] What's the matter with work ?

HILDA.

Pertness isn't argument. Oblige me. [Extending her hand condescendingly, in invitation to MARION to button her glove.] Work ! Why, you can't work when you've had such a slip-up as she's had—not for months, at any rate.

MARION.

[*Buttoning the glove.*] Can't ! She must.

HILDA.

Rubbish ! you can't sober down as if nothing had happened. Oh, where's your common sense ! You can't do it.

MARION.

Than what on earth is her future to be, do you suppose?

HILDA.

You're all thumbs. Her future——?

MARION.

Her future. How is she to exist?

HILDA.

[*Calmly.*] Oh, let's hope that that's the question he's going to settle for her in a minute or two.

MARION.

[*Dropping HILDA's hand and staring at her.*] Hilda——!

HILDA.

[*Returning the stare.*] Hullo?

MARION.

[*Breathlessly.*] Great heavens, you're not encouraging her—! You—you don't suggest—! [*hastening to LETTY, who has been sitting almost motionless throughout.*] Letty! Letty! Letty, you won't suffer this man to influence you, will you? You wouldn't dream of accepting his assistance! No, you wouldn't! [*Sitting beside LETTY and putting an arm round her.*] Oh, Letty! Letty, speak to me!

[*Roughly freeing herself from MARION's embrace, LETTY jumps up from the settee and seats herself, her back to MARION, in the chair on the left. There is a brief silence;*

then, with compressed lips, MARION rises stiffly.

MARION.

[*In dry, level tones, looking down upon LETTY.*] Ah, I don't fancy you and I will be able to shake along together any more. [Fastening her jacket.] I've always tried to keep an eye on you, but I—I think I'll relieve myself of the task henceforth. Good-night. [Turning away reluctantly.] Good-night. [Pausing.] I shall give Mrs. Hill a fortnight's notice on Monday, so far as my share of our place is concerned. I shall move out to one of the suburbs. London—! . . . Oh, I'm disappointed!

[She walks to the door. There she halts and beckons HILDA to her.

MARION.

[To HILDA, quietly.] Hilda Gunning, if you leave her, you'll deserve, when you die, to go straight to—[with a nod] you know.

HILDA.

[Freezingly.] Wherever I go, Miss Allardyce, I trust it will be to mix with those who are much your superiors.

[MARION glances at her contemptuously and departs.

HILDA.

Impudence! You didn't catch what she said? Ho! this is the result of stooping to neighbours.

[The outer door slams. LETTY raises her head.

HILDA.

[*Closing the door of the room and coming to LETTY.*] She can whistle for an invite to another tea-party of mine. Suburbs—the dowdy! Precisely what she's built for.

LETTY.

[*Looking into space.*] She's done with me.

HILDA.

Eh?

LETTY.

She's done with me, Hilda.

HILDA.

The boot's on the other leg: you're quit of *her*.

LETTY.

[*Eagerly.*] Perhaps she'll wait about outside, though! perhaps she won't—give me up—! [She rises and crosses swiftly to the bay window. Pushing the blind aside, she peers into the street.] The rain's stopped; she might walk up-and-down—ah, I see her! [A pause.] No—no—

HILDA.

[*Seating herself upon the settee on the left.*] No—what?

LETTY.

No—she walks too quickly. She's not going to wait. Ah, no, she's turning the corner—she's—

[*LETTY leaves the window and stands leaning against the chair which is behind the table*

on the right. She produces her handkerchief and weeps into it silently.

HILDA.

Oh, you are a soft! Those sort of people can afford to be prim. No gentleman is likely to glance in their direction.

LETTY.

[*Through her tears—not heeding HILDA.*] The suburbs. She's been at me constantly to live in the suburbs with her. There's where simple happiness is to be found, she always contends.

HILDA.

Of course, *I* don't want to pry into your affairs; that's not my nature. But whatever you *choose* to confide in me——

LETTY.

[*Absorbed in her reflections, coming to the chair on the left of the small table.*] Simple happiness—fresh air—and—and fewer temptations——

HILDA.

What were the actual words he used at the restrong—chat things over——?

LETTY.

Fewer temptations——!

HILDA.

Eh?

LETTY.

[*Sitting in the chair, her back to HILDA.*] Er—yes.

HILDA.

Well, you *have* got your foot on the ladder this time, I do believe. He's as jealous—! I detected that at the restrong. And don't forget, *he* isn't aware that it's off between you and Mr. M. No, you must play your engagement to that beauty for all it's worth. Everything favours you ! The dear boy's just in the mood when you can twist him round your little finger.

LETTY.

[*Still lost in thought.*] She *has* been a good mate to me ; she *has* been.

HILDA.

Oh, my gracious, how you maunder on about *her* ! But recollect, all depends on keeping him at a proper distance till you're absolutely certain of him. Don't go making an idiot of yourself. Be icy ; none of 'em can stand that. And be sure you hurry in to me directly you're awake ; I shall be in a perfect fever—[irritably] Letty !

LETTY.

[*Rousing herself for a moment.*] Polly oughtn't to be walking home alone.

HILDA.

Oh, cease it ! No, what he *should* do is to sign a deed—a regular deed—a what-d'ye-call-it ?—a settlement. And he will, too, if you're clever. There's the advantage of dealing with a thorough gentleman——

LETTY.

[*Suddenly, with frightened eyes.*] Hark!

HILDA.

[*After a silence.*] Yes, those were cab-wheels. [Rising and going to LETTY—lowering her voice.] Remember—cold dignity; that's your programme. Ah, we shall have you driving up to Madame's before long and giving us a big order—rolling up in your landauette. Mandeville's Victoria! half-a-crown an hour, including the cockade! Yes, we shall see you sweeping into our rooms with your maid at your heels. French maids—they're the handiest. A French maid and a landauette! Look here, don't stop to dress in the morning; slip yourself into a skirt and jacket and run in—

[*The door on the left is thrown open and NEVILL enters. At the same moment RUGG is seen to go into the room on the further side of the corridor. NEVILL stops short on discovering HILDA.*

HILDA.

You'll excuse the freedom? I came down with her for the sake of the airing, and we thought you wouldn't object—

NEVILL.

[*Removing his gloves.*] It's delightful to find that she hasn't been sitting here yawning in solitude. [Advancing to LETTY, who has risen.] I've been afflicted with a couple of the slowest cabs in London. [In an undertone.] The quickest would have been tedious—

HILDA.

[*Languidly.*] Well, you can dispense with my society. [To NEVILL.] You and Letty have arranged to have a little confab together, haven't you ? [NEVILL and she walk to the door, LETTY gazing helplessly at HILDA's retreating figure.] You'll bring her home, of course ; don't keep her too late. [Facing him.] I say, Mr. Mandeville did get testy at the restrong, didn't he ?

NEVILL.

The limit of irritability justified by our licensing laws was slightly exceeded.

HILDA.

[*With intention.*] She was inclined to be cross with him at first ; but—as I've been telling her—quick temper, warm heart.

NEVILL.

You ladies are models of charity.

HILDA

Oh, no credit due to me. [*Significantly.*] She doats on him, really. [They disappear.] Don't you fuss about me. You go back to her ; the porter will put me into a hansom.

[LETTY sits upon the settee on the right with closed eyes. The voices in the corridor die away ; and then the outer door is heard to shut and at that LETTY's eyes open widely. NEVILL re-enters, gives LETTY a nod and a smile, and, going to the fireplace, rings impatiently. After a short delay, the

library door is opened by RUGG, who is carrying an elegant silk smoking-jacket. The library is lighted.

RUGG.

[*In the doorway, apologetically.*] I beg your pardon, sir.

[NEVILL joins him and they retire into the library. There RUGG assists NEVILL to exchange his dress-coat for the smoking-jacket. While this is proceeding, a cab-whistle is blown in the street immediately beneath the windows. LETTY starts; the whistling is repeated and she listens painfully with parted lips.

NEVILL.

[*Returning.*] I shall require nothing further.

RUGG.

[*Remaining within the library.*] Thank you, sir.

NEVILL.

Sorry to have had you down.

RUGG.

No consequence at all, sir.

[RUGG passes out of sight and NEVILL crosses to the door on the left as the man enters the corridor from the bedroom.

RUGG.

[*To NEVILL.*] Good-night, sir.

NEVILL.

Good-night.

[NEVILL watches him depart. Again the outer door slams, whereupon NEVILL closes the door on the left and approaches LETTY.]

NEVILL.

His quarters are at the top of the house. We've seen the last of him.

LETTY.

He—he'll think it very strange.

NEVILL.

Not he. And in the course of the morning I'll hit upon a plan to smuggle you out unobserved. For the time being, you shall be fixed-up at some quiet hotel.

LETTY.

[*Staring at him.*] What, aren't you going to let me—return to my lodgings?

[*His steady gaze answers her and she rises.*

NEVILL.

You've had your struggle, Letty; I've had mine also, in a measure. But, as I told you at the Café Régence, this was inevitable.

LETTY.

[*Hanging her head.*] No, no. That awful Café Régence; that was dreadful luck! If only you had not dined there——!

NEVILL.

It would have made no material difference. Sooner or later this would have occurred.

LETTY.

You say that *now*.

NEVILL.

I've seen it from the first. While I have been sitting with you under the trees in Kensington Gardens, playing the innocent boy—almost persuaded of his existence!—I have found myself grinning inwardly at my own credulity. I persisted in humouring a delusion; but, at the back of my head, I was conscious of it being nothing more.

LETTY.

[*Weakly.*] Delusion?

NEVILL.

That those artless summer evenings—a dinner or two—a theatre—were to form the whole sum of our acquaintance.

LETTY.

It *was* something more. You didn't wish to harm me; you *don't* wish it——!

NEVILL.

Of what avail is it what one wishes in these cases! Yes, I toyed with the idea until the arrival upon the scene of Mr. Mandeville, when I perceived that the pleasant game of innocent boy was at an end and that I *had* to undeceive you—and myself. Even then I allowed you a fair start—a good, sporting run; there's

that to be urged in my favour, Letty. But I caught up with you last night—[gripping her shoulders] simply because it was bound to be. [In another tone.] My dear child, your cape is wet through. Didn't you drive here?

LETTY.

I dismissed the cab round the corner ; I hadn't the courage . . . am I wet ? . . . the rain came on so suddenly. . . .

NEVILL.

Give me the thing.

[She removes her cape and he hangs it upon some object at the back of the room. Then, mechanically, she unpins her hat and is contemplating it with dull eyes when he returns to her.

NEVILL.

[Softly.] A sad spectacle, eh ?

LETTY.

It's spoilt.

NEVILL.

My dear, you shall own half the hats in London on Monday.

[She places her hat on the piano and, again sitting on the settee on the right, rests her arms upon the head of the settee and buries her face in them. He takes the chair which is nearest to him and draws it close to her.

NEVILL.

[Sitting.] We'll indulge in no more talk of that

kind. [With a wave of the hand.] There are several species of happiness in the world; we've tasted one, hey for another! And listen. [She quivers.] No, but listen. I am anxious that you should understand this clearly. Whatever is in store for us—for you; whatever the finish of our—friendship may be; you've done with poverty finally. You shall never again experience the smallest uneasiness on that score. [She raises herself and looks at him with an expressionless face. Taking her hands—which are still gloved—he speaks to her with great earnestness.] Yes, I propose to provide for you, my dear, in such a manner that, should I treat you ill, you can snap your fingers at me. At least I'll safeguard you to that extent. You follow me? Should I be brute enough to prove ungrateful to you hereafter—to grow neglectful of you, or should you tire of me; you shall be in a position to turn your back upon me, none the worse—little the worse—for our association. [Slowly but firmly she disengages her hands and, with knitted brows, increases the space between NEVILL and herself.] What is in your mind?

LETTY.

[In a low voice.] Mr. Letchmere——

NEVILL.

[Reproachfully.] Sssh! Letty!

LETTY.

Nevill—I—I am glad you have spoken to me in this way.

NEVILL.

It had to be touched upon We'll dismiss it.

LETTY.

No—wait a minute. I am glad ; for I am as anxious as you are that we should understand each other distinctly.

NEVILL.

If there's anything—don't hesitate——.

LETTY.

[*Plucking at the fringe of a pillow.*] It—it's awfully generous of you to—to desire to make me—safe. But no—I won't have that. No, no ; I've some right left to deal with what concerns myself, I suppose, and—not *that*, if you please.

NEVILL.

Why, my dear girl, it has been an absorbing ambition with you——!

LETTY.

To be comfortably-off ? How clearly you must have seen through me, sitting under the trees of Kensington Gardens ! Yes, I—I did hope to—to marry well one day. I was always fond of telling myself fairy-stories !

NEVILL.

Isn't this a fairy-story ? Can't you regard it in that light ?

LETTY.

Oh, we shall be in paradise, I've no doubt, for a while. Yes, I give you leave to shower as much bliss on me as you possibly can, until—ha !—till I tire of you. But when the hour strikes for our good-bye—no money. I wouldn't ! [Her head bent, her hands

clenched between her knees.] No, if I'm willing to throw my life out of window, I'm willing to pay for it as I ought to. But I—I'll not be paid; you sha'n't fling your purse after me! [Lifting her head.] You love me?

NEVILL.

I do. On my oath, I do!

LETTY.

[*Taking off her gloves.*] Am I the—hundredth you have said that to? Hush! I beg your pardon. You love me at this moment.; that's sufficient, if it is so. [*Laying her gloves aside and extending her hands to him.*] For love, then!

NEVILL.

[*Pressing her hands to his lips.*] Letty——!

LETTY.

[*Jumping up and giving herself a little shake.*] Ah—h—h! [*Recklessly.*] Ha! we are a merry pair, aren't we? Ugh! [*Blowing her serious mood away.*] Pheugh!

NEVILL.

[*Imitating her.*] Pheugh! Ha, ha!

LETTY.

Ha, ha, ha—! [*Abruptly, holding his arm and shivering.*] Ssst! oh, Nevill——!

NEVILL.

What——?

LETTY.

[*Looking down at her shoes, piteously.*] Do find me something to slip my feet into. These are soaked.

NEVILL.

My dear girl!

[*He leaves her, enters the library, and disappears. She moves about the room excitedly, glancing eagerly at its appointments and touching the various articles of furniture with a caressing hand as she encounters them. In the end, uttering a sigh of contentment, she sinks into the chair on the left, her head thrown back, her arms hanging loosely.* NEVILL returns, at the door on the left, carrying a pair of velvet slippers. *He closes the door and holds up the slippers before her in triumph.*

LETTY.

[*Delightedly.*] Ha ! they're capital. You dear fellow !

[*He hands her the slippers, from the further side of the settee. Then, standing at the large table, he proceeds to mix a drink.*

NEVILL.

You should have asked for them before. You'll catch a terrible cold.

[*Having kicked off her shoes, she rises and displays her slippered feet.*

LETTY.

Ha, ha !

NEVILL.

Ha, ha, ha ! Charming !

[Kneeling upon the settee on the left, she accepts the glass which he offers her. She sips the drink and coughs ; and, at her invitation, he fills the tumbler to the brim with soda-water. Then he mixes a drink for himself.]

NEVILL.

[While this is going on.] Letty——

LETTY.

Eh ?

NEVILL.

A propos to our paradise—our earthly paradise——

LETTY.

Our earthly paradise—— !

NEVILL.

Have you ever travelled ?

LETTY.

Travelled—— ?

NEVILL.

Abroad.

LETTY.

Just a little. Years ago, when I was a child, my dad took me to Boulogne. [He laughs.] Don't laugh. [Turning her head away.] And recently, I'd have you know, sir—recently the chance was offered me of visiting Trouville.

NEVILL.

Trouville ?

LETTY.

[*Partly to herself, with a look of detestation.*] Troo—veal.

NEVILL.

It would amuse you——?

LETTY.

To travel ! [*All brightness again.*] Ah, yes, yes more than I can say !

NEVILL.

Where shall we make for, at the beginning ?

LETTY

Everywhere is novelty to me.

NEVILL.

Switzerland ?

LETTY.

Switzerland !

NEVILL.

I know the most enchanting spot for people who—for such as ourselves.

LETTY.

Do you ?

NEVILL

A village in the Schamser Valley. A deliciously quaint inn—a few straggling houses—a bridge crossing a stream—meadow-land—pine woods——

LETTY.

Ah !

NEVILL.

Agreed—Switzerland ! Dropping down into Italy afterwards——

LETTY.

Ah !

NEVILL.

Seeing the September moon in Venice——

LETTY.

Oh !

NEVILL.

And home by way of Paris.

LETTY.

Paris !

[*He touches her glass with his and they drink, looking into each other's eyes.*]

LETTY.

[*Suddenly.*] Nevill—— !

NEVILL.

Eh ?

LETTY.

[*Staring into her tumbler*] Home - by way of Paris.
Home !

NEVILL.

Back to London. [*She is silent.*] You adore London.

LETTY.

I—I used to. I shall be frightened of it now, though.

NEVILL.

Frightened——?

LETTY.

You are among your grand friends in London. In London you might—you might——

NEVILL.

What?

LETTY.

[*In a whisper, appealingly.*] *I might tire of you.*

NEVILL.

Tscht! forget that. We'll merely pause to refit, then, and be off to Egypt.

LETTY.

[*Depositing her glass upon the table.*] Yes, yes—off immediately. [*Leaning against the back of the settee, ecstatically.*] Switzerland! Italy! Paris! Off again! Egypt——! [*He has produced his cigarette case and lighted a cigarette. He now comes from behind the settee.*] When do we start?

NEVILL.

[*Giving her a cigarette.*] How long will it take the milliners to prepare you? [*She lights her cigarette from his. To steady her, he places his hand behind her head. Then he withdraws his hand, glances at it, and again*

[touches her head.] You foolish little woman—not to have driven up to the door !

LETTY.

[Putting her hand to her head.] Ah ! the rain——
[Rising, she removes the imitation tortoise-shell pins from her hair and shakes it free over her shoulders.] It will soon dry. *[She lays the pins upon the table on the right. He follows her.]* I think I could be ready at the end of next week, by rushing round frantically.

NEVILL.

[Gaily.] The end of next week it shall be.

LETTY.

[Breathlessly.] I shall be the busiest woman in town on Monday morning !

NEVILL.

[Seating himself at the piano and playing.] And it's Ho for the wild-flowers of the Schamser Thal !

LETTY.

[At the sound of the music.] Ah ! *[Coming to the settee on the right.]* Go on ! That's the duet from *The Gossamer Girl*—where she is seated upon the swing——!

NEVILL.

[Nodding.] Now the man's voice comes in.

LETTY.

[Nestling in the pillows of the settee.] Yes—as he watches her, standing at the gate——!

NEVILL.

The two voices.

LETTY.

[*Lifting her feet on to the settee.*] Ah—h—h! [Drowsily, as he finishes.] Play the pretty piece you played the afternoon we girls first called on you.

NEVILL.

[*Getting rid of his cigarette and resuming playing.*] The barcarolle?

LETTY.

[*Almost inaudibly.*] The first afternoon——!

NEVILL.

[*While he plays.*] We shall hear this when we are in Venice, you and I—at night, upon the Grand Canal. The musicians move out into the middle of the canal, Letty . . . their barge is hung with coloured lanterns . . . we, with a crowd of other gondolas, will steal after them and moor ourselves alongside. [*Her cigarette drops to the floor.*] The moon will be shining . . . you've not seen moonlight until you've seen the September moon in Venice—— [*He discovers that she is asleep. He goes to her and calls to her softly.*] Letty—Letty—— She raises her head and stares at him.] You mustn't fall asleep here.

LETTY.

[*Bewildered, as he assists her to rise.*] Asleep—? Have I been—asleep——?

[*Releasing her hand, he turns sharply towards the door on the left. Then he walks to the*

centre of the room and stands eying the door and listening.

LETTY.

[*Under her breath.*] Oh ! what's that ?

NEVILL.

[*Quietly.*] Nothing. [*Smiling at her.*] I fancied I heard—— [*There is a gentle rap at the door.*]

LETTY.

Oh !

[*The knock is repeated and NEVILL opens the door.* RUGG is in the corridor with a letter.]

NEVILL.

[*To Rugg.*] What are you doing there ? Why are you still up ?

RUGG.

I beg pardon, sir. [*Handing NEVILL the letter.*] I was down-stairs, smoking a cigarette with Dale, the porter, when a messenger brought this from the office in Piccadilly. I noticed it was Mrs. Crosbie's hand-writing, sir, and I thought it might be important.

[*NEVILL reads the letter. As he does so, his face assumes a look of blank dismay.*]

RUGG.

I kept the lad, sir. Any answer, sir ?

NEVILL.

[*Irresolutely.*] No—yes—yes. I'll ring.

[RUGG disappears, closing the door. NEVILL sits upon the settee on the left.]

LETTY.

What is it? Has anything happened?

NEVILL.

My—my sister——

LETTY.

Your sister——?

NEVILL.

My sister, Florence! She—she's gone.

LETTY.

Gone?

NEVILL.

Yes, she's bolted.

LETTY.

I—I don't——

NEVILL.

No, you don't . . . Tiny! . . .

LETTY.

Nevill——!

NEVILL.

[*Rising and speaking to her in a strange, hard voice.*] You see, there's a young fellow who's very fond of her; and she's got a swine of a husband; and Drake—that's the boy—Drake and she had determined to

end the affair—to bid farewell to each other. The three of us dined at the Régence—

LETTY.

Ah——!

NEVILL.

I'd promised not to leave her, you see. She couldn't trust herself; so I promised to stick to her.

LETTY.

Didn't you?

NEVILL.

No, I—I broke my word.

LETTY.

How——?

NEVILL.

She and I were going on to Green Street, to a card-party; but when you appeared with Mandeville I—
[pacing the room] I turned her over to Drake.

LETTY.

[Following his movements.] You went to Green Street—you told me—

NEVILL.

Yes, and she'd been there, and left word that she'd chucked it and gone home to bed. That was to put me off, of course. I did drive down to Buckingham Gate—she lives at Buckingham Gate—but the house was in darkness and I naturally concluded—
[Sitting in the chair on the further side of the table on

the right and studying the letter.] She was scribbling this to me, in Drake's rooms, while I was staring up at her window! Here——! [*She draws the other chair up to the table and seats herself. He reads the letter aloud.*] “12.30. Dearest Nevill. Do help me by breaking the joyful news to Ivor. I've tried, but under the circumstances the words won't sort themselves. After all I am a genuine Letchmere, Nevill. Copy is taking me away with him and I am done-for.” [*To LETTY.*] They're in his motor. [*Scowling.*] It was in readiness; he had intended travelling during the night. [*Reading.*] “——taking me away with him and I am done-for. Now that the wrench is over, I feel jollier than I have felt for the last five years.” [*Surprised.*] Five years! [*To LETTY.*] She's been married five years! [*Reading.*] “——jollier than I have felt for the last five years. But you *were* naughty—[*after a pause*] you *were* naughty, to let me out of your sight.” [*He passes his hand across his brow, then continues.*] “I borrowed a coat and hat from Helen Urquhart's maid. Please give the woman a fiver for them on Monday. *Adieu*—Copy is fidgeting me to death. Ever your affectionate TINY. P.S.—It's coming on to rain, so we may have an ugly side-slip and break our silly necks. A good job too!” [*Rising.*] Ivor—Ivor—[*seating himself at the writing-table.*] Pardon me.

LETTY.

[*Who has risen with him.*] Is he—the husband?

NEVILL.

Yes. [*At intervals, as he writes a note.*] Yes, he's her husband . . . Ha! . . . Where is the fellow? . . .

Sulking, as usual, over his gin-and-potash at a club . . . the Junior, probably . . . Plymouth gin is his tipple at two in the morning—with lemon in it. [Pausing.] I must stop his turning-up here, Letty, before noon at the earliest. Why shouldn't I be driving down to Kew at day-break, with the tidings, to my father? That's credible. [Writing again.] How he'll rave, when we do meet . . . and curse . . . and weep! . . . Faugh! he drops out of my world . . . Touch the bell, Letty. [She obeys him. He folds his note.] Short and sweet. [Enclosing it.] He's got it short and sweet—no lemon in it. [Addressing the envelope.] "Ivor—Greatorex—Crosbie—"

[*There is a knock at the door on the left and LETTY retreats to the other side of the room to escape observation.* NEVILL opens the door upon RUGG.

NEVILL.

[*Giving him the note.*] To Buckingham Gate—no reply.

RUGG.

Very good, sir.

NEVILL.

Write a message on the slate downstairs: Mr. Letchmore is in to nobody till after mid-day.

RUGG.

Yes, sir.

NEVILL.

Good-night, again.

RUGG.

Good-night, sir.

[Once more NEVILL watches the man depart and, upon hearing the outer door close, shuts the door of the room. LETTY advances to NEVILL and they confront each other for a few moments in silence. Suddenly he breaks into a peal of laughter.

NEVILL.

Ha, ha ! Ha, ha, ha, ha !

LETTY.

Hush ! don't—— !

NEVILL

Ha, ha, ha, ha ! One more, gone the same road ! One more—genuine Letchmere ! Yes, but I did think she'd succeed in shaping a different course ; I was a damned fool to think it ; but—somehow—I did——

LETTY.

[Faintly.] Nevill—— !

NEVILL.

She was a dainty little thing, Letty. She is so still, for that matter. [Pointing to a framed portrait which stands on the piano and to another upon a cabinet on the left.] There she is—and there—over there. Oh, but as a girl—! I've some pictures of her as a girl——

[He goes into the library and is heard opening and shutting the drawers of an escritoire.

LETTY moves about the room agitatedly, examining the portraits of Mrs. CROSBIE.

NEVILL.

[With growing passion.] Tiny ! Tiny ! little Tiny ! By God, she *was* pretty—yes, and straight. And she'd have remained straight if she had had half a chance. That's it! My sister Florence hasn't had the ghost of a chance. Crosbie ! We stood by and permitted her to marry Crosbie ! We married her to Crosbie ! [Reappearing.] He'd blast the soul of any woman breathing, Crosbie would !

[He comes from the library carrying some photographs, framed and unframed.

NEVILL.

[Handing her the photographs one by one.] There ! look ! isn't that fascinating ? She was about seventeen then—she wasn't out. Look at it !

LETTY.

Ah, yes.

NEVILL.

I wonder whether he'll behave well to her—Drake, I mean. [Giving her another picture.] Somewhat later. You can judge how attractive she must have been. Letty, Drake'll deal honourably by her—he'll make her his wife directly she's free, eh ? [Running his hand through her hair.] Ho ! how should you know, my dear ? I'll horsewhip him if he doesn't. You mark me, I'll slash him across the face if he doesn't. Ah, there ! there's my favourite—[showing her a small portrait in a frame] the year she was married—— !

LETTY.

Beautiful—beautiful——

NEVILL.

I ask you, isn't that the face of an innocent girl?

LETTY.

Yes, yes.

NEVILL.

She's not to blame for this; Crosbie's to blame.
That's the face of a pure woman, isn't it? Isn't it?

LETTY.

[Without premeditation, looking into the portrait intently.] I believe I should have recognised her as your sister anywhere.

NEVILL.

What—you would——!

LETTY.

[Covering the lower part of the picture with her hand.] They're your eyes, aren't they?

NEVILL.

[Taking the portrait from her and viewing it with fresh interest.] Why, yes, you're right—brother and sister! [Pityingly.] Poor, frail little varmint! Well, there's less than a couple of years between us, and she has kept out of the ditch till to-day; that's beating the Letchmere record hollow. Oh——! [Flinging the photographs on to the settee upon the left.] Mix me another whisky-and-soda, Letty.

[*He sits upon the settee on the right, and she goes to the table on the left and tremblingly prepares his drink.*

NEVILL.

Ha, ha, ha ! Quite correct, Mr. Crosbie—we're all of a pattern ! Quite correct, you stern censor of morals—rotten to the core ! Oh, my lord ! I remember us as children in the school-room at Withdene—Gerald, Hugh, Gladys, Florence ! We seemed a nice, curly-headed crew ! Oh, my lord !

[*She comes to him, eyeing him half-curiously, half-fearfully, and presents him with his glass.*

NEVILL.

Thanks—

[*He takes the tumbler from her, not observing her, and with his disengaged hand motions to draw her down to his side. She shrinks away from his reach and seats herself in the chair in which she has previously been sitting by the small table.*

NEVILL.

Thanks. [*After a gulp at his drink—absorbed in his reflections.*] Yes—yes, and so it will be with that small boy of mine—the young gentleman who, if he lives, will some day be the head of my distinguished family. He'll begin life full of the most excellent resolves ; despising his forbears—his mamma will teach him *that* ; determined to carry it through in fine, reputable style. And then, of a sudden, the blood in him will assert itself and he too will be a genuine Letchmere—a

genuine, out-and-out Letchmere ! Phew ! Still, would to God there had been one of us, if it had been only a woman, whom they couldn't have cast in the boy's teeth ! But no, even Tiny has failed us. [*Rousing himself—to LETTY.*] She was here in the afternoon, Letty, shortly before you came.

LETTY.

[*Dully*] She ?

NEVILL.

My sister, Florence—here, in this room.

LETTY.

Was she ?

NEVILL.

Discussing with me our family imperfections ! Ha, yes ! it's not many hours ago that I solemnly declared my conviction—declared it honestly !—that it was reserved for her to fly higher than the rest of us ! Ho, ho ! What was it I said to her ? [*Gathering, with an effort, the threads of his conversation with FLORENCE of the First Act.*] “We're rotten bad, every one of us—men and women.” “Every one of us ?” she said—I can hear her saying it ; “isn't that a bit premature ?” Premature ! ha, ha ! “I beg your pardon,” I said ; “not you, Tiny—you'll make a better show than the others. [*His voice softening.*] The family record is monotonous reading, old girl; you'll be the first to vary it for heaven knows how many generations ! [*Gazing before him wistfully.*] And who can tell ! Old Nick once kicked on the shins—once—oh, Tiny, Tiny, just once——!”

[She faces him abruptly and they stare at each other for some seconds, interpreting each other's thoughts. Then she gets to her feet and goes swiftly to the chair on the left. There she sits, and in a hurried, resolute manner, rids herself of the slippers she is wearing and pulls on her shoes. Laying his glass aside, he rises and walks across to her.

NEVILL.

What are you doing? [She rises.] What are you doing?

LETTY.

[Under her breath.] Now's the time—now. If you saved me—! Ah, do!

[She hastens to the table on the right, collects her hair-pins, and screws up her hair.

NEVILL.

Don't be absurd, Letty. Letty, don't be absurd. You've misunderstood me. I was speaking of what another might be capable of. It would be rather late in the day for me to play the saint! No, no; leave your hat alone. Don't be absurd. Sit down.

[Not heeding him, she puts on her hat and fetches her cape from the back of the room. Slipping the cape over her shoulders, she searches for her gloves. She discovers them upon the settee on the right, picks them up, and turns towards the door—to find NEVILL standing before it. She halts.

NEVILL.

[*After a pause*.] You are making yourself ridiculous. Take those things off again. Sit down.

LETTY.

[*In a murmur.*] Mr. Letchmere . . . Now's your time . . . be good to me . . . save a woman . . . once . . . !

[*There is a further silence ; then he advances to her slowly. Quakingly she holds her ground.*

NEVILL.

[*Withdrawing his eyes from her.*] Well—you may go back to your lodgings.

LETTY.

Ah——!

NEVILL.

[*Moving.*] I—I'll change my coat and see you to your dcor.

LETTY.

[*Clutching his sleeve.*] No, no ; don't stir. Stay where you are ; don't come with me. Don't let us—risk——

[*He allows her to pass him. She glances at him over her shoulder, and then a mutual feeling draws them together and they embrace. Finally, he releases her and she goes quietly away. He follows her into the*

corridor and looks after her. Presently the outer door slams and he returns, and, first carefully closing the door of the room, seats himself upon the settee on the left, his head bowed in thought.

END OF THE FOURTH ACT.

THE EPILOGUE

The scene represents a waiting-room in the establishment of a thriving photographer. In the wall at the back, on the left, is a door—the upper part of which is glazed with ornamental glass—opening into the room from a landing. On the right, also in the back wall, are folding-doors admitting to a further apartment. In the wall on the right-hand side is a fireplace—where a bright fire is burning—and against the opposite wall, facing the fireplace, are a console-table and mirror.

The decorations and furniture have the appearance of newness. On the left, near the spectator, is a table littered with unmounted photographs and the materials for “touching” them. A chair stands before the table. Further away is an easel bearing a large portrait, and close to the single door there is a combined umbrella-and-hat stand. Against the back wall, between the doors, is a cabinet; and on the right there is a large circular table upon which lie a number of albums. Comfortable chairs are placed round and about this table; an arm-chair faces the fire; and other chairs occupy the spaces on the right and left of the mantelpiece and console-table. The walls are

almost entirely covered with photographs in frames ; and there are framed portraits upon the mantelpiece, the cabinet, and the console-table.

It is daylight.

[MARION, her hands encased in mittens, is seated at the table on the left "touching" some photographs, while ORDISH is engaged in arranging the contents of a drawer in the cabinet at the back. His appearance has changed for the better, his clothes being in excellent condition, and his hair and beard neatly trimmed. There is a shrill whistle from a speaking-tube beside the fireplace. ORDISH whistles in response, and puts his ear to the tube.]

ORDISH.

[To MARION.] Miss Saint Maur.

MARION.

Her basket can be carried upstairs. Mr. Perry will have arrived before she has changed her gown.

ORDISH.

[Speaking into the tube.] Is that you, Miss Vickary ? [Having obtained a reply.] Burton has gone upon an errand, has he ? [After listening again.] Then take Simmons off the windows. Tell him he must lend a hand with the lady's dress-basket. Number Three room.

[The door on the left opens and HILDA enters, richly attired in winter garments, followed by a maid carrying a jewel-bag.]

HILDA.

[*Shaking hands with MARION, who rises.*] How are you to-day, Miss Allardyce? [To ORDISH.] Good morning, Mr. Ordish.

ORDISH.

Good-morning, Miss Saint Maur.

HILDA.

[*To her maid, sternly.*] Now, you get 'em to show you the way to the dressing-room——

ORDISH.

[*Moving to the folding-doors.*] Follow me, please.

HILDA.

[*Unlocking the jewel-bag with a key attached to a bracelet she is wearing.*] After you've unpacked the trunk, you can lay my jewellery out upon the table. And don't go dropping any more diamond stars on the floor, if you can possibly help it.

[*The maid flounces away and disappears, with ORDISH, through the folding-doors.*

HILDA.

[*To MARION.*] Cheeky little baggage! I'm astonished she didn't give me one of her back-answers.

MARION.

[*Icily.*] Does she do so, as a rule?

HILDA.

Does she! She put out her tongue at me last night ; I saw the reflection in the looking-glass. Ladies' lives are rendered perfectly unendurable by their maids. That trollop's my third in six weeks.

MARION.

Really ?

HILDA.

What a buck Jimmy Ordish is growing ! You might do worse, Polly ; you and he ought to come to an agreement.

MARION.

We have.

HILDA.

No ! have you ?

MARION.

[*Sitting and resuming her work.*] Yes—to mind our own concerns.

HILDA.

Oh, don't be so tart—no affront intended. [*Seating herself at the round table.*] Ouf ! You hardly expected to see me again as soon as this, I suppose ?

MARION.

Most of Mr. Perry's sitters return, I am glad to say.

HILDA.

There's been such a rush on my pictures ever since we produced our new show. That Ompeer gown of mine seems to have knocked 'em completely. And

Perry was pretty successful with me when I first patronised him.

MARION.

Most successful.

HILDA.

[Consulting a jewelled watch.] He needn't have dragged me here, though, at this unearthly hour if he couldn't attend to me on the tick. My appointment's eleven.

MARION.

Something has detained him, evidently—a fog on the line, may be.

HILDA.

On the line?

MARION.

They don't live here any longer; we require all our available space for business purposes. They've bought a little villa at Neasden.

HILDA.

Neasden! What a fate! However, if she's satisfied—! It was you who used to cram the suburbs down her throat in the old days, wasn't it?

MARION.

It was.

HILDA.

Well, the best end of Oxford Street is good enough for me, notwithstanding the rents. Two-hundred-and-fifty a year for three rooms you couldn't swing a cat in!

MARION.

Dreadful!

HILDA.

And a quarter always paid in advance. And would you credit it—I'm not allowed to pick out the simplest tune on the piano after twelve-thirty A.M.! And why? Because I happen to be an actress!

MARION.

One doesn't want to play the piano after that hour, luckily.

HILDA.

There's no knowing; you may, if you're feeling down in the mouth. [*Sentimentally.*] Ah, my dear, I often dream I'm back at Ma Watkins's, and catch myself wishing it was reality.

MARION.

[*Turning to her.*] You do?

HILDA.

The greatest triumphs have their—what-d'ye-call-'ems?—their penalties, I can assure you; and even I suffer from the blues now and again.

MARION.

[*Earnestly.*] Hilda, why not—why not—give it up?

HILDA.

Retire from the stage!

MARION.

[*Dryly.*] Yes—retire from the stage.

HILDA.

Out of the question, my dear ! If you're born with talent, you've got to go where talent leads you. Thank your stars you're not gifted.

MARION.

I am profoundly thankful.

HILDA.

Ignorant persons imagine that a theatrical career is an easy, *dolly-far-nienty* sort of a life. Far from it, let 'cm take it from me ! Turning out in all weathers, with your coachman in liquor occasionally ! And how many times d'ye think I change my dress in the course of an evening, to make no mention of mat'neys ? Guess !

MARION.

I can't.

HILDA.

Eight—and a hundred-and-seventy-three stairs to mount to do it.

MARION.

The exercise should keep you in health.

HILDA.

Health ! You can't tax brain and muscle to that extent ; it *must* end in a break-down, sooner or later.

MARION.

Brain ?

HILDA.

Yes, brain. [*Loftily.*] There's a rumour flying about the theatre that I'm to be given some words to speak at Easter.

[PERRY—*now somewhat portly and with a florid complexion—bustles in at the door on the left. He is wearing a cape, woollen gloves, and a comforter.*]

PERRY.

[*Removing an artistic hat as he enters.*] Ah, my dear Miss Saint Maur! a hundred thousand pardons! [*Shaking hands with HILDA.*] Inexpressibly sorry if I have kept you waiting. Good morning, Miss Allardyce. [*To HILDA.*] The fact is, we missed our usual train A trifling matter of a domestic nature—but Mrs. Perry will explain—

[LETTY, *also in wintry out-of-door attire, enters breathlessly—rosy-cheeked, buxom, a picture of healthy young-womanhood. She advances to HILDA and shakes hands with her, though with some constraint.*]

LETTY.

How are you, Hilda? You'll forgive Mr. Perry for being late, I hope. It's my fault entirely.

PERRY.

[*Taking off his over-things and laying them on a chair.*] Scarcely, my darling.

LETTY.

[*Kissing MARION affectionately.*] Good morning.

MARION.

Nothing amiss at home?

LETTY.

[*Giving her hat, coat, and gloves to MARION.*] Baby was inclined to be rather fretful—the least suspicion of a cold—

[ORDISH re-appears, entering at the folding-doors.]

PERRY.

[*To ORDISH.*] Good morning to you, Mr. Ordish.

LETTY.

Morning, Jimmy.

PERRY.

[*To ORDISH.*] Is my capable lieutenant, Mr. Fitzgerald, in the studio?

ORDISH.

He is.

PERRY.

[*Coming to HILDA, who rises.*] A superb toilette, if I may venture upon a criticism! Why should not our initial essay be to secure a representation of Miss Saint Maur as she appears in private life?

ORDISH.

An excellent notion, sir!

HILDA.

I am agreeable.

PERRY.

Ha! I anticipate striking results.

[*He turns away and blows into the speaking-tube.* HILDA advances to LETTY.]

HILDA.

[*To LETTY.*] Shall I find you here when I come down? If so, we could have a jaw.

LETTY.

[*Glancing at the table on the left, uneasily.*] I—I have to be busy.

HILDA.

Pity. You *are* looking blooming, I must admit. Got a little shanty at Harrow, she tells me.

LETTY.

Neasden.

HILDA.

I might take a drive in your direction one Sunday and see the child. What's its name?

LETTY.

[*Avoiding her eye.*] Enid.

MARION.

I am her god-mother.

HILDA.

[*Gathering her furs round her.*] I'm not over-fond of cootsey-cootseying, but I shall enjoy a cackle. [Nodding.] So-long. Ta, ta !

[*She joins ORDISH and they pass out together through the folding-doors.*

PERRY.

[*Speaking into the tube.*] Kindly inform me, Miss Vickary, what appointments have been made for me before luncheon.

LETTY.

[*To MARION—sitting at the table on the left and digging her fingers into her hair.*] Oh, I'm a brute ! a brute !

MARION.

[*To LETTY.*] No, you're not ; you didn't actually forbid the woman to visit you.

[*They continue talking in undertones.*

PERRY.

[*Speaking into the tube.*] Mrs. Craik—eleven-thirty. Colonel Holroyd—twelve. Miss Mainwaring—half-past. Am I accurate ? [*Listening.*] Oh, Drake—not Craik. [*Speaking.*] Mrs. Drake—not Craik ; I comprehend. If Mrs. Drake is punctual, I can dispose of that lady while Miss Saint Maur is assuming her professional costume. [*Listening.*] Yes. [*Speaking.*] I am obliged.

[*As he leaves the speaking-tube, MARION goes out at the folding-doors carrying LETTY's hat, coat, and gloves. LETTY is now apply-*

ing herself methodically to the touching of the photographs. PERRY takes up his hat, cape, etc., and comes to her.

PERRY.

Lunch at one, darling?

LETTY.

Yes, Dick.

PERRY.

Till then—

[She throws her head back and he kisses her. Again there is a whistle from the speaking-tube. He hurries to the tube and blows in reply.]

PERRY.

[Alternately listening and speaking into the tube.] Oh! ah! hey? No, no, certainly not; my personal services will be at her disposal in two minutes.

[He disappears rapidly through the folding-doors. LETTY hums an air cheerfully as she proceeds with her task. Presently a knock is heard at the door on the left.]

LETTY.

Yes? Come in.

[The door is opened by FLORENCE—a beautifully-dressed, faded woman with some gray in her hair and the lines of discontent about her mouth.]

FLORENCE.

[Entering—listlessly.] They send me up to the first-floor. Is this the room?

LETTY.

[*Rising.*] You have an appointment, I believe, madam?

FLORENCE.

Half-past-eleven.

LETTY.

[*Indicating a seat at the table.*] Pray take a seat. Mr. Perry will be at liberty shortly. [FLORENCE sits and lifts her veil as LETTY opens one of the albums and lays it before her.] Perhaps it would interest you to glance at these while you are waiting. [Mending the fire.] What exceedingly severe weather we are having, madam!

FLORENCE.

Very. [LETTY returns to the door to close it.] You need not shut the door. My brother is with me. He likes to take his own time in mounting stairs.

[LETTY stands holding the handle of the door, and by-and-by NEVILL appears walking slowly and feebly. His shoulders are bent, his cheeks thin and drawn, and altogether he has the air of an invalid.

NEVILL.

[To LETTY, courteously.] Ah, don't trouble —

[He has passed her before the light of recognition flashes into his face. Then he turns and they gaze at each other for a moment in silence. Finally he crosses to the fireplace and stretches out his hands to the fire.

NEVILL.

Ah—h—h !

FLORENCE.

[*Raising her eyes from the album, reprovingly.*] Why didn't you remain in the carriage, Nevill?

NEVILL.

[*Gaily, but in a weak voice.*] Grant me this small indulgence. Let me remind myself that I once won my College mile. [*Ensconcing himself in the arm-chair and drawing it close to the fire.*] A glorious blaze!

[*LETTY has resumed her seat at the table on the left.* MARION re-enters at the folding-doors, and, barely glancing at the other occupants of the room, comes to her.

MARION.

[*To LETTY, pointing to the litter on the table—in an undertone.*] Shall I push on with some of this stuff downstairs?

LETTY.

Eh?

MARION.

What's wrong?

LETTY.

Wrong?

MARION.

Aren't you up to much to-day?

LETTY.

Yes. What were you asking?

MARION.

Shall I help you by marching off with a heap of these?

LETTY.

Will you? [*Giving her a roll of photographs.*] Make a mem, Polly, that the proofs of Mrs. Anstruther's miniature have to catch the country post to-night without fail.

MARION.

Right, dear.

[*As MARION goes out at the door on the left, ORDISH presents himself at the folding-doors.*

ORDISH.

[*Standing within the adjoining room—to FLORENCE.*] Mrs. Drake?

FLORENCE.

Yes?

ORDISH.

Will you come this way?

FLORENCE.

[*Rising—to NEVILL.*] At any rate, there's no necessity for you to climb higher. [*Coaxingly.*] I shouldn't, were I you.

NEVILL.

[*From the depths of the chair.*] I won't, if you'll dispense with my attendance. [*Waving a thin, white hand.*] I invoke blessings on the operation! Look your sweetest.

FLORENCE.

[*Bitterly.*] Ha!

[*She follows ORDISH, and the folding-doors are closed. After a brief pause, NEVILL—who has been unconscious of the coming and going of MARION and ORDISH—takes his eyes from the fire and glances round the room. Seeing that he is alone with LETTY, he rises and approaches her. She also rises, hearing his footsteps, and they confront one another.*

NEVILL.

[*Gently.*] Are you employed here?

LETTY.

I—I am Mrs. Perry.

NEVILL.

The wife——?

LETTY.

Yes.

NEVILL.

You are married to the proprietor of this establishment?

LETTY.

Yes.

NEVILL.

I congratulate you, sincerely. On all sides I hear Mr. Perry's work spoken of in the warmest terms.

LETTY.

He *is* becoming very widely known. He is not only clever, but painstaking. You—you remember him?

NEVILL.

I? I fear—no——

LETTY.

[Awkwardly.] He was at the Café Régence one night—when——

NEVILL.

Ah? [Racking his brains.] A fair young gentleman!

LETTY.

No, no; you are thinking of Mr. Neale. Charley Neale went out to South Africa; he's—poor fellow——

NEVILL.

Of course! Perry! Mr. Perry! And I had helped him earlier in the day with his camera!

LETTY.

Yes, yes.

NEVILL.

[With a gesture.] Rather—er—of medium height?

LETTY.

That is he.

NEVILL.

Good gracious! I remember him clearly. Two years ago, quite!

LETTY.

Two years and a half. [Busying herself with the litter on her table.] It was in the middle of summer.

NEVILL.

Why, yes—June—[*He walks away to the table on the right. There is a pause.*] Let me see, you were in the stock-broking world in those days?

LETTY.

If you can call it stock-broking. I—I was a clerk at Dugdale's.

NEVILL.

Dugdale's—yes, yes, yes. I presume you chucked Mr. Mandeville—[*pulling himself up*] er—you left Dugdale's——?

LETTY.

I never went back there after I—after I—ceased knowing you. I had an illness, for one reason.

NEVILL.

Did you? I—I'm grieved. You were delicate, I recollect.

LETTY.

Not over strong.

NEVILL.

But are thoroughly robust now?

LETTY.

[*Half-turning to him, smilingly.*] Isn't it plain that I am?

NEVILL.

It is, indeed. And having recovered from your illness——?

LETTY.

Mr. Perry was setting-up business here in Baker Street—his uncle was backing him; that enabled him to strike out—and he required some young ladies—some girls of passable appearance——

NEVILL.

I understand. And —and ultimately——?

LETTY.

Yes.

NEVILL.

You—you and he——?

LETTY.

[*In a low voice.*] When I had been with him about six months.

NEVILL.

And you are happy? The question is superfluous.

LETTY.

Perfectly happy. He is such a good little man—that is, such a good man.

NEVILL.

My impression of him is distinctly pleasant.

LETTY.

[*With feeling.*] He's funny ; but, oh, so kind ! We —we live at Neasden.

NEVILL.

[*Vaguely.*] Neasden ?

LETTY.

[*Nodding.*] The Laurels, our house is called.

NEVILL.

Really ?

LETTY.

It had no name when we purchased it ; it was merely Number Fourteen.

NEVILL.

[*Slightly puzzled by her manner.*] Fourteen——?

LETTY.

[*With drooping lids.*] It was my husband's idea to call it The Laurels ; and his idea also—also——

NEVILL.

Also——?

LETTY.

That our daughter should be christened Enid.

NEVILL.

A daughter——?

LETTY.

Yes.

NEVILL.

You have a daughter?

LETTY.

Just under a year old. A dear little thing.

NEVILL.

[With a polite inclination of the head.] Resembling
her—

LETTY.

[Simply.] Her papa.

NEVILL.

[Consolingly.] Ah, well, she'll grow.

[They laugh together, her eyes meeting his for
the first time. Suddenly she checks herself
and is silent.

NEVILL.

Eh?

LETTY.

I run on, talking of myself. Will you excuse
me—?

NEVILL.

Certainly.

LETTY.

I—I am afraid you have been an invalid more
recently than I.

NEVILL.

Oh, I—I am as fit as a fiddle.

LETTY.

Hush ! no, no. What's the matter—please——?

NEVILL.

[*With a smile.*] Home-sickness—if you will wring it from me.

LETTY.

Home-sickness !

NEVILL.

[*Grimacing.*] They are sending me away, Mrs. Perry.

LETTY.

Why ?

NEVILL.

Because I caught a trumpery cold at Harrogate in August. Upon my word, they've no other justification. Yes, they are packing me off to a place in Germany—a beastly place in Germany——

LETTY.

In Germany ?

NEVILL.

Where I am to be compelled to dwell almost entirely in the open air——

LETTY.

[*Under her breath.*] Oh !

NEVILL.

Where I shall receive innumerable suspiciously cheery letters from the men at my club, planning gaicties for my return ; where I shall scribble equally light-hearted epistles in reply, dealing humorously with the ghastly comedy of my surroundings—— !

LETTY.

[*Motioning him to sit, tremblingly.*] Don't stand——

NEVILL.

However, out of evil—— ! Do I not owe this encounter to my approaching banishment ? By bringing my sister here this morning, I provide myself not only with what will doubtless prove a charming specimen of Mr. Peiry's talent—I carry with me to Nordrach the assurance of the welfare of a young lady in whom I shall remain interested as long as the affairs of this world interest me at all.

[He seats himself in a chair at the table on the right. She produces her handkerchief and, without attempt at concealment, wipes away her tears.]

LETTY.

When—when do you leave ?

NEVILL.

[*Brightly.*] I am borne hence this day week by Mrs. Drake—in a bundle.

LETTY.

Mrs. Drake—Mrs. Drake is your sister Florence ?

NEVILL.

Yes

LETTY.

I heard my husband mention a Mrs. Drake as being among his morning's sitters, but it didn't strike me to connect her with you.

NEVILL.

Naturally.

LETTY.

He did marry her, then——? I beg your pardon —I mean, she married again?

NEVILL.

[*Frowning.*] In due course.

LETTY.

Is *she* happy, at last? Ah, I hope so.

NEVILL.

My dear Mrs. Perry, is *anybody* happy—save yourself? Poor Tiny! a more unsatisfactory beggar than Mr. Coppering Drake doesn't walk the earth. Whew! I am denied the luxury of getting into a rage——

[He rises and crosses to the left, where he surveys the litter upon the table scowlingly. As he moves, she goes to the folding-doors, opens them an inch or two, and listens.

LETTY.

[After a pause.] Mr. Letchmere. [He turns to her.] One more question.

NEVILL.

No, no—a dozen.

LETTY.

Your little son—your boy? Is he well?

NEVILL.

[Eagerly.] Ha! that he is. By Jove, Mrs. Perry, that fellow is a strapping chap!

LETTY.

Ah?

NEVILL.

He was at my rooms yesterday. They've brought him to me regularly of late. He turns up again on Thursday—to bid me good-bye. He's full of excellent promise, they tell me. [Dropping his voice.] I wonder!

LETTY.

Don't!

NEVILL.

Don't——?

LETTY.

Don't wonder; be sure.

NEVILL.

[Lightly.] Ha, ha!

LETTY.

Oh, be sure, be sure!

NEVILL.

[Thoughtfully.] We shall see—others will see.

[She listens again at the folding-doors, then closes them and returns to him.]

LETTY.

[Her hands clasped tightly.] Your sister will be down soon. Mr. Letchmere——!

NEVILL.

Yes?

LETTY.

You are glad, you say, to carry away with you the knowledge of my welfare?

NEVILL.

Glad—comforted.

LETTY.

I want to give you something else to take with you
—a keepsake—a memento——

NEVILL

A memento ?

LETTY.

A mere word for you to bear in mind constantly. I want you to appreciate thoroughly one fact—that I realise to whom I *owe* my welfare. It is scarcely probable that you and I will meet often in the future ; it is possible—we may—never——

NEVILL.

Quite possible.

LETTY.

I should like you to carry with you, then, as almost the last word you ever heard me utter—this word——

NEVILL.

What word, my dear ?

LETTY.

Thanks. I was very foolish when—when you knew me, worse than foolish ; and now I find myself, as it were, in harbour—through no desert of my own. I have married in my proper rank, an honest man who is devoted to me ; we have a child ; we are tolerably prosperous. We shall live, God willing, the humdrum lives of “respectable people” ; and if old age is granted

to us, we shall nod over our winter fire, and doze in our garden in summer, as meek and humble a white-haired couple as could be met with out of an alms-house. As true as I stand here, instead of scoffing at these things as I would have scoffed at them two-years-and-a-half ago, I believe in them as being the richest gifts this world can bestow. [*Drawing herself up to her full height and offering him her hand.*] Thanks.

NEVILL.

I shall carry your word with me, Mrs. Perry; I cherish the possession of it. [*Releasing her hand.*] Thanks. The man would be fortunate who, upon his death-bed, could recall having earned that word, spoken with the significance you attach to it, not once but a score of times.

LETTY.

Perhaps. But—once will suffice.

NEVILL.

Ha! I wonder!

LETTY.

Don't—be sure. Be sure!

NEVILL.

I will try to be, my dear.

[*Hearing the sound of approaching footsteps, she moves to the fireplace as FLORENCE and ORDISH enter at the folding-doors. ORDISH goes to the door on the left and, opening the door, waits there for FLORENCE to precede him.*

FLORENCE.

[*To Nevill.*] Have I taxed your patience?

NEVILL.

Not in the least.

FLORENCE.

[*To Letty.*] You have my address?

LETTY.

[*Advancing to her.*] Yes, madam.

FLORENCE.

Mr. Perry pledges himself to be quick.

LETTY.

You may rely upon us, madam.

FLORENCE.

Good morning.

LETTY.

Good morning, madam.

[*Florence departs, Ordish following her.*

NEVILL.

[*To Letty, pointing to Ordish.*] Why, he is an old acquaintance of mine too!

LETTY.

[*At the door.*] Yes—Jimmy Ordish. And Marion is down-stairs, in the shop. Marion—!

NEVILL.

[*Pausing in the doorway and looking at her smilingly.*] You forget no one.

LETTY.

[*Returning his gaze steadily.*] No—I forget no one.

[*He passes out. She closes the door and stands leaning against it, staring into space.*]

THE END





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